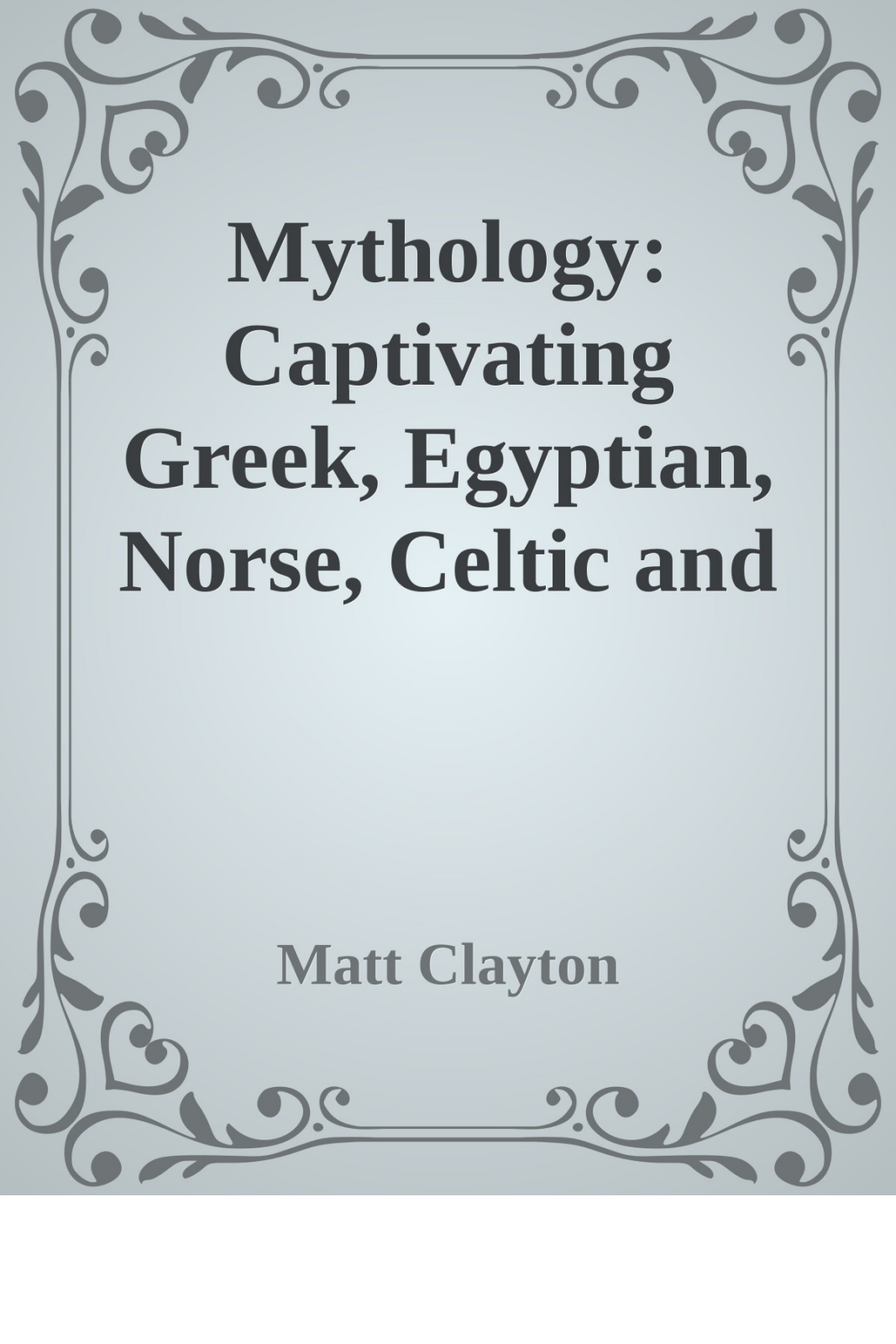


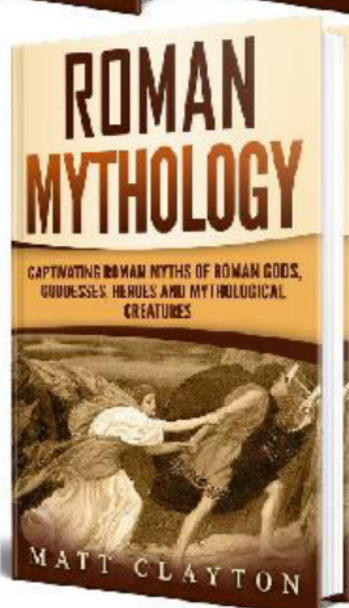
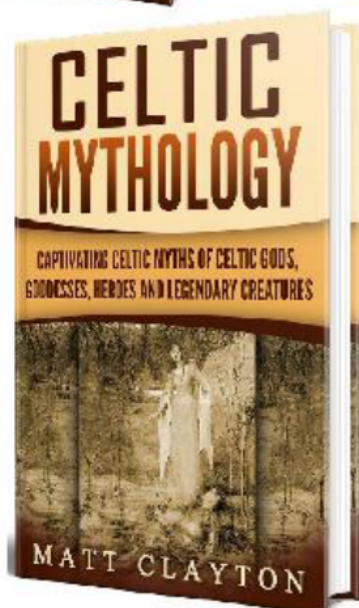
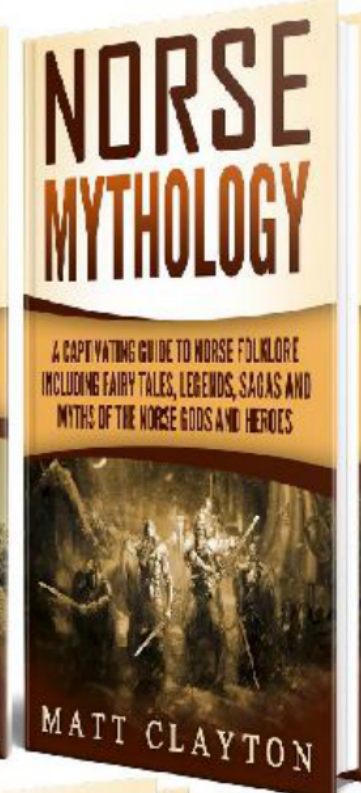
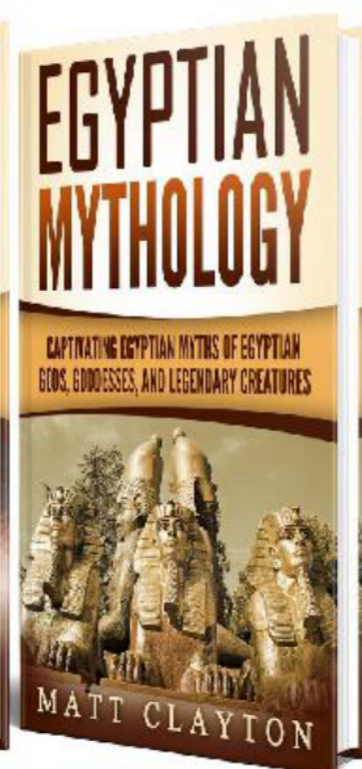
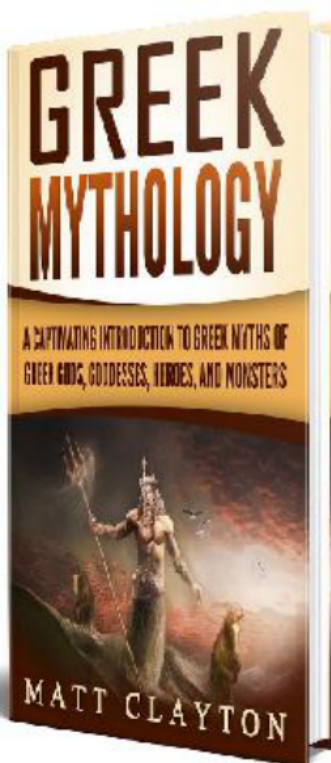
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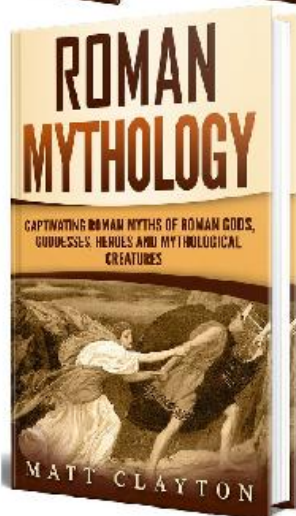
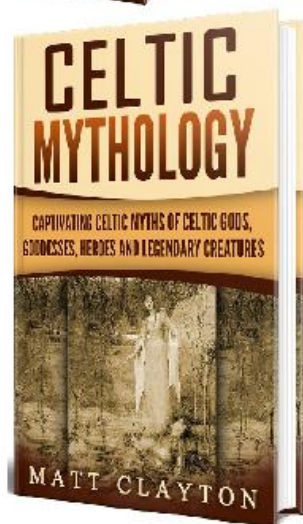
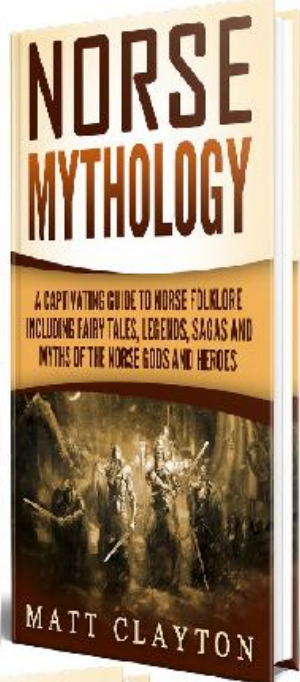
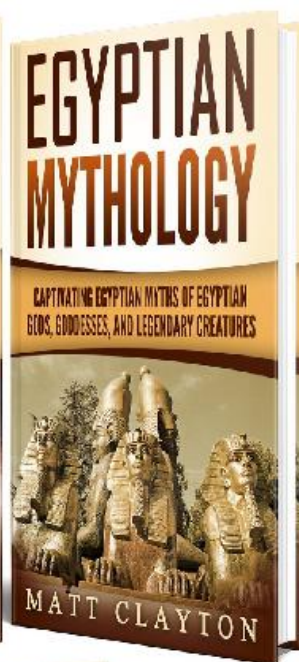
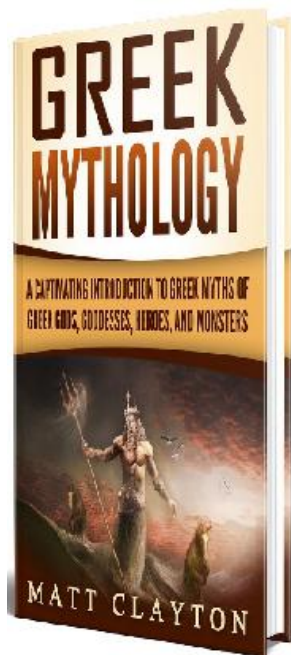
Mythology: Captivating Greek, Egyptian, Norse, Celtic and

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Mythology

*Captivating Greek, Egyptian, Norse, Celtic
and Roman Myths of Gods, Goddesses,
Heroes, and Monsters*

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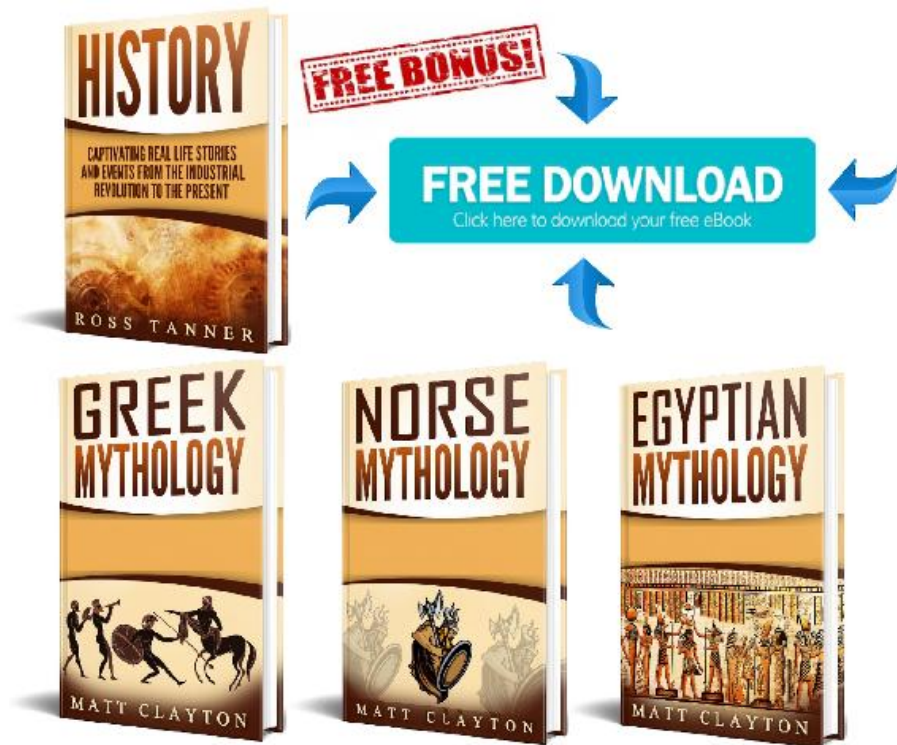
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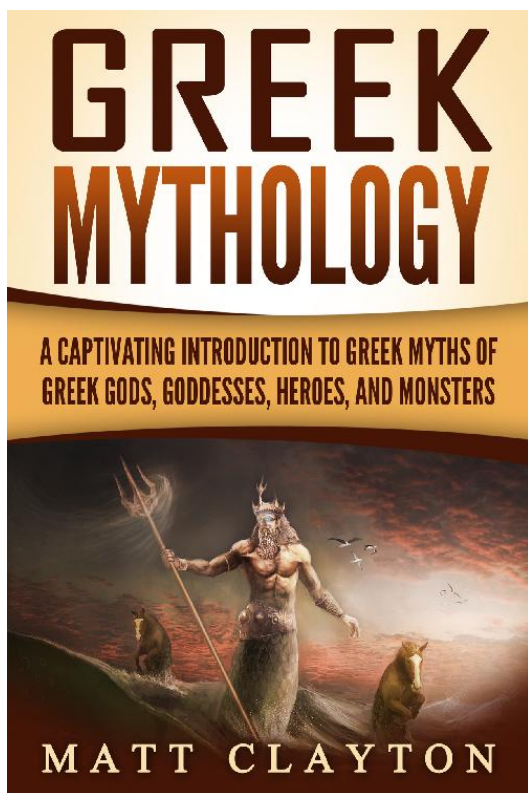
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Section 1: Greek Mythology
*A Captivating Introduction to Greek
Myths of Greek Gods, Goddesses, Heroes,
and Monsters*



Introduction

Greek mythology, philosophy and science lie at the roots of Western language, culture and civilization. But in these specialized days we may find it surprising that the Greeks didn't draw a sharp line between these fields. They were exploring all manner of questions about the cosmos and the human place in it: where did all this come from? Who are we? What forces shape our destinies? What are we really free to choose? How should we make those choices? One fruit of that exploration was a diverse and prolific collection of stories about gods and mortals which still have the power to move us deeply and to shape our way of seeing the world.

Our common expression reveals the ongoing relevance of Greek mythology. We may speak of Trojan horses and Oedipus complexes, of titanic struggles and tantalizing enticements, of odysseys and of the Midas touch. We do this, even if we're not personally familiar with the tale of the Trojan War, the tragedy of Oedipus, the wars of the Titans, the punishment of Tantalus, Odysseus' homecoming or King Midas' perilous reward. But familiarity with the underlying stories opens up a new layer of rich meanings.

Sometimes language references are made more confusing by the fact that most of the Greek gods and heroes have two sets of names. Their stories were first told by the Greeks. When the Roman Empire conquered the Greek city-states, they took the Greek deities and myths as their own, but they retold the stories and also renamed all the characters. When we speak of the Dionysian temperament, we're referring to the god of wine and inspiration by his Greek name, Dionysius. In Latin, the same god was called Bacchus (from whom we got the word 'bacchanal.') Cupid is a familiar figure under his Latin name, but his original Greek name, Eros, gave us our word 'erotic.' Knowing both names for the pantheon makes it easier to catch cultural and linguistic references. This book draws on both Latin and Greek tellings, and I have used the names used by my primary sources in each tale. Chapter 2, The Rulers of Olympus, gives the Greek and Latin names for the major gods and goddesses. The Appendix at the end gives the Latin names of the pantheon in alphabetical order, accompanied by each deity's Greek name.

Some of the great stories of the Greek gods and heroes have already been told in my earlier book [*Greek Mythology: Captivating Greek Myths of Greek Gods, Goddesses, Monsters and Heroes*](#).

Others are explored here. Both books describe the creation of the universe and give a basic introduction to the Greek and Roman pantheon, though these are covered at greater length in *Greek Mythology: Captivating Greek Myths of Greek Gods, Goddesses, Monsters*

and Heroes . And there is far more in the mythos than either book can cover. Notes on my primary sources, and suggestions for further reading can be found in the Conclusion.

Part I. Origins

Chapter 1 – In The Beginning: The Creation of the World, and the Titan-Olympian War

In the beginning was Chaos, a vast disordered sea of darkness. Out of chaos, two beings took form, no one knows how: one was Night and the other Erebus, the dark void, the realm of the dead. Night laid an egg in the depths of Erebus, and somehow, out of that compounded darkness, the egg hatched into something utterly unlike its parents: “Love, the longed-for, shining, with wings of gold.” In the light of love, Earth (also named Gaia) arose and took shape. Her first child was Heaven (Uranus), her equal and her mate.

The children of Heaven and Earth took very different forms. The Cyclopes were huge powerful creatures and had one great eye each in the middle of their foreheads. Each of the Hecatoncheires had fifty heads and one hundred hands, and strength like that of the Cyclopes. Then came the twelve Titans, strong as their siblings, but having a shape more like the form that would later be given to mortal humans, both male and female.

Uranus hated the appearance of his children the Hecatoncheires, and he imprisoned them in the depths of the Earth. But Gaia grieved for their imprisonment, and she called for her free children to overthrow their father and set their brethren free. Only one heeded her call: the Titan Cronus. His mother gave him a sickle of adamant, and he lay in wait for his father and castrated him.

Uranus fled in shame and agony. Where his blood struck the earth the Erinyes—that is, the Furies, the avengers of blood—arose, and ever since that day they have walked the earth, pursuing those who do evil. Their hair was made of snakes and their tears of blood. We shall see more of them in Chapter 9. But some tales say that they were not the only offspring of that mutilation. Uranus’ genitals fell into the great sea, which rose in foam, and from that foam stepped beautiful Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love.

Cronus seized power in his father’s absence, but he did not release the Hecatoncheires from their prison. Perhaps his successful attack on his father had shown him how tenuously power was held. Certainly he came to fear rivals. He took his sister Rhea to wife, and she bore him children, but Cronus had heard a prophecy that one of his children would dethrone him as he had dethroned his father. Fearing this, he swallowed his children as soon as they were born .

Cronus had not, it seemed, learned anything about the dangerous

power of a mother's grief. That was his downfall. For Rhea wanted her children to live, and when her sixth child, Zeus, was born, she smuggled him away to Crete, giving Cronus a stone to swallow in his place. Thereafter she bore no more children. Zeus was raised on the story of his father's tyranny and his mother's despair, and he swore to right the wrong. When he was grown to full strength his grandmother Gaia helped him to force Cronus to vomit up the children he had swallowed. Then Zeus and his siblings made war against the Titans. It was a terrible struggle, which shook earth, heaven and the underworld and came near to breaking them down and returning the world to the primal chaos.

Zeus freed the Hecatoncheires to help him, and in the thick of the fighting, the Titan Prometheus defected to the side of the young gods, bringing his malleable brother Epimetheus with him. Prometheus was the god of forethought, and perhaps he was able to see who would have the victory. But later on he showed compassion for the weak and oppressed even when it cost him everything, and it may be that he joined the young gods in compassion and they would not have had the victory without him and his brother. Be that as it may, Zeus and his allies were finally victorious, and they cast Cronus and the rest of the Titans into Tartarus, a black pit in the depths of the earth. One Titan, Atlas, was made to support the weight of the heavens on his shoulders. Only Prometheus and Epimetheus remained free.

On Mount Olympus, the victorious deities established their citadel, which was made both beautiful and highly defensible. Thereafter they were called the Olympians. There were rebellions by giants and monsters after the Titans fell, but the Olympians conquered all, and at last, there was peace in heaven and on earth.

According to one story, it was Prometheus and Epimetheus who created animals and humans to inhabit the world that had been cleared of monsters. Epimetheus, a well-meaning but scatterbrained sort, gave gifts to all the animals; some could fly, some could breathe underwater, some were clawed, some armored; and then he came to humans and realized he had nothing left to give those naked creatures. So Prometheus lifted them to walk upright like the gods and gaze upon the heavens. He also gave them the gift of fire, which had belonged to the gods alone, and tricked Zeus into letting humans provide the gods with the fat and bones of their sacrifices while they ate the good meat themselves. Zeus had been grateful when Prometheus pitied Zeus and his siblings, but he was furious with Prometheus for pitying mortals. Zeus bound Prometheus to a mountain peak where an eagle tore at his liver every day—it magically regrew every night, so that there was no end to his life or his pain. But Prometheus never repented what he had done or asked

Zeus for forgiveness; and on the earth, men and women loved and multiplied, spread and became wise in many arts.

Notes:

There are many and varied accounts of the creation. Edith Hamilton's classic *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* gives a cogent summary of the main variations .

The quoted description of the birth of Love comes from the comic playwright Aristophanes.

A long and moving description of the works and sufferings of Prometheus can be found in Aeschylus' play *Prometheus Bound*, which is available in many English translations.

Chapter 2 – The Rulers of Olympus

What follows is a short description of the most important of the new gods who ascended to power after the defeat of the Titans. We'll get a closer look at some facets of their character in later stories.

Gods:

Zeus (Jupiter or Jove to the Romans), following his defeat of Cronus, was lord of the heavens and king over the deities of Olympus. He wielded the thunderbolt which no enemy could withstand. He was husband to Hera, brother to Hera, Hades, and Poseidon, and father to Apollo, Ares, Artemis, Athena, Hermes, and many more. His children were born to many mothers, which was a grief to Hera. Sometimes he is described as the upholder of justice and protector of poor people, guests, and suppliants; sometimes he is described as rather arbitrary and tyrannical (as in his punishment of Prometheus), not to mention philandering.

Poseidon (Neptune to the Romans) was the god of the sea, creator of calms and storms. Thus both feared and revered by sailors and all who had occasion for voyages. He also created horses, a great gift to humans. He wielded a powerful trident. His brothers were Zeus and Hades, and his wife was Amphitrite. His son was **Proteus**, a very wise deity who liked to keep his wisdom to himself. Humans who wanted to learn from Proteus first had to find him, and then hold onto him as he became a variety of wild beasts in turn. If they could hold fast long enough, he would take his own shape and tell them what they wanted to know.

Hades (Pluto to the Romans) was the god of the netherworld, which was named after him. Although “Hades” is occasionally used as a polite euphemism for the Christian Hell, Hades’ realm was not necessarily a place of punishment, although it was dark and the journey there was perilous and terrifying to those few living mortals who dared venture there, drawn by love or need. We will see more of Hades and his realm in later chapters. He was, obviously, the god of the dead; as the god of the depths of the earth from which precious metals came, he was also the god of wealth (hence our word ‘plutocrat’). His unwilling wife was Persephone—her story is told under her name below.

Apollo (who was also Apollo to the Romans; sometimes also called Loxias or Phoebus) was the god of the sun, music, prophecy and medicine. It was said that he could utter no falsehood, and his oracle at Delphi gave truthful answers to mortals who sought it out—though indeed that truth was often so riddlingly and obscurely worded that mortals who tried to act in response to its pronouncements sometimes felt that they had been deceived. He

taught men the healing arts, and he delighted all living beings with his music, but he cruelly punished a mortal who dared to rival his musical skills. He was moreover a god of archery, one who never missed his shot, so it was highly inadvisable to anger him in any way. His father was Zeus, his mother the Titaness Leto; his twin sister was Artemis.

Hermes (Mercury to the Romans) was one of the youngest gods, but not the least significant. He was the patron of commerce, and also of theft. As a child less than one day old, he stole Apollo's cattle, and when Apollo came to reclaim them, Hermes got him to trade them back in return for the lyre, which Hermes had just invented. He was often the messenger of the gods, and many of his statues show him with winged feet. His father was Zeus and his mother, the Titaness Maia. His son was **Pan** (Faunus to the Romans), the god of shepherds and goatherds. Pan's shape was something between a goat's and a man's. The music he made on his panpipes was enchantingly sweet, but he also made the indefinably alarming noises which frighten travelers at night—our word 'panic' comes from Pan's name.

Ares (Mars to the Romans) was the god of war. Not necessarily just war, or defensive war, but any war going. We get 'martial' from his name. Some human authors revered Ares for the courage he taught and the glory which could be won in his service; others reviled him as cruel, arbitrary and pitiless—and, in some versions, a coward as well. He was more popular with the Romans than the Greeks, which says something about what each society valued. His parents were Zeus and Hera and his twin sister, and frequent companion was Eris, the goddess of strife. He does not seem to have had a wife, but for a time Aphrodite, the Goddess of Love, was his lover.

Hephaestus (Vulcan or Mulciber to the Romans) was the smith of the gods, who made their ornaments, their weapons, and many other things both beautiful and terrible. Alone among the gods he had the misfortune of being crippled, though this did not hinder him in his work. Hera was his mother; his paternity is in some doubt. Some stories say he was married to Aglaia, one of the Graces, but more say that he was married to Aphrodite, who betrayed him with Ares.

Eros (Cupid to the Romans) was the god of love and the companion—in later tales, the son—of Aphrodite. His paternity is uncertain, given his mother's habits. His character is similarly disputed. All agreed that he brought love into human hearts. Some said he was a grave and gentle spirit who moved mortals to generosity, courage, and goodness and gave beauty and light to the world; others that he was a wayward boy who shot his passion-inflaming arrows spitefully, or randomly, or when blindfolded, and drove mortals to lust and ruin. His wife was Psyche; the story of their courtship is told in chapter 12 .

Dionysius (Bacchus to the Romans) was the god of wine, madness, and ecstasy. His father was Zeus, and his mother was the mortal woman Semele. Semele died before bearing him, largely due to Hera's jealousy, but Zeus saw to it that the premature child lived, and later Dionysius took the terrible journey to the underworld to bring his mother back and lead her to everlasting life with the bright gods in Olympus. On earth, the poets say he was worshipped, not with orderly rituals and sacrifices in temples, but by troops of ecstatic women who lived out of doors and roamed from place to place, drinking, dancing, and singing, their eyes bright with wine. These Maenads (Bacchanals, to the Romans) had a freedom and a joy about them, but they could also turn to murderous madness.

Prometheus the Titan, the first benefactor of humans, has been described in the preceding chapter.

Goddesses:

Hera (Juno to the Romans) was Zeus' wife and sister, and the mother of Hephaestus, Ares, Hebe and others. Many of the stories about her have to do with her jealousy of Zeus and her attempts to punish either him or his lovers—though in the Trojan War (see Chapter 3) and the quest of the Golden Fleece she took an active role for other reasons. She could be very kind to mothers whose children weren't begotten by Zeus; she and her daughter **Ilithiya**, who doesn't come up in the myths retold in this book, helped women in childbirth.

Athena (Minerva to the Romans; sometimes also called Pallas) was the virgin goddess of wisdom, strategy, and defensive war (for the most part, although in the Trojan War she aided the attackers, for reasons of her own which are described in Chapter 3.) She was the patroness of the city of Athens, and the creator of olive trees (an important gift, as olive oil was an essential part of the Greek diet). She also taught mortals many of the arts of civilization. Poseidon made horses, but Athena made the bridle and taught humans horse-taming. Weaving and agriculture are also said to be her gifts to men. Still, like Apollo, she could be jealous and vindictive; when a mortal woman, Arachne, dared to say that her weaving rivaled Athena's own, Athena challenged her to a contest, and when their work was seen to be equally good Athena destroyed the weaving and beat the woman, who hanged herself. (Athena does seem to have felt somewhat sorry afterward; she brought Arachne back to life as a spider so that she would weave forever; from her, we get our word 'arachnid.') Athena was the daughter of Zeus, having sprung from his head full-grown and fully armed.

Aphrodite (Venus to the Romans) was the goddess of love and desire. Like her son Eros, she might be blessed or cursed by mortals, depending what their own experience of love had been. She gave

laughter and beauty and delight to mortals, and also shame, confusion and torment. In the Iliad, she is Zeus' daughter, but most tales say she had no parents, having been born when Uranus' genitals struck the foam of the sea. She was married to Hephaestus but seems to have preferred Ares .

Artemis (Diana to the Romans) was the virgin goddess of the hunt, of wild animals, and of the moon. She was beautiful, strong, skilled, and solitary. She was said to be the protector of wild creatures, and of human young as well, especially virgins—though this contrasts oddly with her role in the story of Iphigenia, told in Chapters 3 and 9. Her twin brother was Apollo, her mother Leto and her father Zeus. Some stories also identify her with Selene, goddess of the moon, and Hecate, goddess of the underworld.

Demeter (Ceres to the Romans) was the goddess of the earth, of fruitfulness and of growing plants. Athena might have taught men how to cultivate grain, but Demeter gave it life. She was loved and honored for this—and the poets also remembered the dreadful time when Demeter grieved and withdrew her power from the earth. For Demeter had a daughter, **Persephone (Proserpina to the Romans)** , a very beautiful girl. Hades, lord of the underworld, saw her beauty and wanted it for himself, and he seized her and took her by force into the dark world below. Demeter searched for her daughter a long time, and when she learned who had taken her, she left Olympus and shut herself up in her grief. For a time she wandered among mortals in the shape of a poor old woman, and rewarded richly those who took her in and treated her with kindness; then she took on her divine form again, but she kept herself apart from gods and men as she wept for her daughter. While Demeter grieved no green thing grew in the wild, and no seed sown by the farmers sprouted; the earth was locked in winter for a whole year round, and people grew famished. Zeus saw that all things would die if this continued, and he sent Hermes to Hades to carry Zeus' command that Persephone must be released. He sent her back unwillingly, but first he tricked her into eating pomegranate seeds which bound her lastingly to the world of the dead for four months of every year. So for nine months mother and daughter are together, and plants grow and flourish, the sun shines warm and the winds blow gently; but for four months Persephone descends to the dead again and Demeter mourns, the winds are sharp and cold, frost gnaws the land, and nothing grows.

Eris is the Goddess of Discord, the sister of Ares, daughter of Hera and Zeus, and generally to be found at his side when mayhem and slaughter are afoot. She is credited with setting in motion the events which led to the Trojan War—see Chapter 3. Unlike her brother Ares, she seems to have been unpopular even with the Romans.

Hestia (Vesta) was the virgin goddess of hearth and home, much loved and venerated by many mortals though not much celebrated in their more dramatic stories. Her father was Zeus.

Part II. The House of Atreus and the Trojan War

Chapter 3 – The Roots of Discord

The great war of the Greeks and Trojans and all the sorrow and death that followed from it, both in the battlefield and in the homes of the victors and vanquished alike afterward, began with what might have seemed to be petty quarrels and jealousies. Perhaps that is often the way of great wars.

Eris, the Goddess of Discord, once took offense because she had not been invited to a wedding. Given her inveterate habit of stirring up quarrels, it's unsurprising that nobody wished to invite her, but offending her was equally dangerous. When the Olympians sat at the wedding feast, a hand reached through the curtains of the pavilion and flung something down onto the table. Not a weapon, but a gift—a perilous gift. It was a golden apple, gleaming in the light of the torches, and on it was inscribed no name, but only the words FOR THE FAIREST. The goddesses all laid claim to that title, and the gods were understandably loath to wade into that quarrel. Some of the goddesses backed out of the fight, but Hera, Athena and Aphrodite all absolutely insisted that the apple was theirs, and they appealed to Zeus to settle the matter. Zeus looked at his wife and his daughter and the goddess of love and decided not to try to arbitrate such a perilous dispute. Instead he told them to go ask a mortal, the prince Paris, who had an excellent eye for female beauty.

Paris was a prince of Troy, the son of its old King, Priam, but he had been sent away to work as a shepherd because his father had heard a prophecy that one day Paris would cause Troy's destruction. Priam was no wiser about the danger of self-fulfilling prophecies than Cronus had been before him, but he was at least kinder in that he did not kill the boy. Paris found consolation in his exile; when the goddesses found him, he was living as the consort of a very lovely nymph named Oenone.

Paris seems to have thought nothing of danger when three radiant goddesses appeared before him and demanded that he should judge which of them was the most beautiful. They all backed their claims to beauty with bribes. Athena promised him that if he declared her the fairest, she would make him a great war-leader and he would conquer the Greeks. Hera, not to be outdone, promised to make him master of Asia and Europe. Aphrodite laughed and said there were other conquests which he might enjoy more. If he preferred her claim to beauty, she said, the most beautiful woman in the world would be his. Paris, who loved his pleasures, gave the golden apple to Aphrodite,

and never understood that in doing so he was bringing doom on his father and his native city.

No one doubted who the most beautiful woman in the world was at that time. Helen's mother was the mortal woman Leda, but her father was Zeus, who had come to Leda in the shape of a swan and made her pregnant. Helen was gorgeous even as a young child, and when she reached the age of marriage all the princes of all the lands around desired her and came to the court of her mother's husband, King Tyndareus, to urge their suits.

Tyndareus might not have been entirely sorry to have his wife's child by another taken off his hands, but he feared that if he chose one suitor, the others would take offense and make war on him. He made each suitor swear that no vengeance would pursue Helen's stepfather or her husband, whomever she married and that each man would fight to defend Helen's husband's marriage right against any seducer or abductor. They all swore the oath, hoping to be chosen. Then Tyndareus chose Menelaus, King of Sparta. The other suitors went home disappointed, but they kept the oaths they had sworn; and Menelaus took Helen home, greatly rejoicing. Who would Helen have chosen? Was she pleased with her stepfather's choice? The stories do not tell us.

Now Menelaus was a well-connected man, the brother of the powerful Agamemnon, King of Argos, but he and Agamemnon were also men under a curse—through no fault of his own, but because of his father's and great-grandfather's deeds. That story must be told in brief here, as the family curse shadowed much of what follows.

The grandfather of Agamemnon and Menelaus was Tantalus. He was a son of Zeus, and the Olympians treated him with kindness and welcomed him at their feasts, though he was only mortal. But he returned their kindness with scorn, though he hid it well. When he invited the gods to come and feast at his house, he set meat before them and did not tell them that it was the flesh of his own son Pelops whom he had killed. He thought to show the gods as greedy fools, and to shame them as cannibals.

He was the fool. The gods knew what he had done. They recoiled in horror from the table, and by their power, they brought the boy Pelops to life again. Tantalus they sent straight to the halls of Hades, where he sat by a beautiful pool of clear sweet-smelling water—water that shrank away from him whenever he bent to drink or cupped his hands and reached for it, and rose again to mock his agonizing thirst as soon as he withdrew. Around that pool grew trees that bore sweet fruit in all seasons, showering him with luscious smells—and lifting their branches out of his reach as often as he reached for them. When he cried out with hunger and thirst and despair the gods did not pity

him. He left the world his name as a byword for hopeless craving, and his example as a warning against child-slaughter and against mocking the gods. He left his children his curse .

Pelops seems to have lived virtuously and safely enough. Not so his sons. The younger, Thyestes, seduced the wife of the elder, King Atreus. Atreus punished that deed by killing the children of Thyestes and making their father unwittingly eat their flesh. Learning what he had done, Thyestes was stricken with sick horror. He hated himself and hated Atreus more. All the power was in Atreus' hand; Thyestes had nothing but a curse to give—but he gave that, and it stuck. And the sons of Atreus were Menelaus and Agamemnon.

Perhaps when lovely Helen was given to him Menelaus believed that he was free from the family curse. They had been man and wife for sometime when Paris gave the apple to Aphrodite, but Aphrodite was no great regarnder of marriage vows, her own or anybody else's. She led Paris to Menelaus' court. Menelaus welcomed him and trusted him: the laws of hospitality were bone-deep and forbade any harmdoing between host and guest. But Paris and Helen looked on one another with longing. Helen said afterward that she had been compelled by Aphrodite and it wasn't her fault; others suggested that she had found Paris good-looking and decided to cast the blame on Heaven. However that may have been, when Menelaus asked Helen to elope with him, Helen consented. When Menelaus was away from home Paris led Helen into his ship, and they set sail, not for the home of his exile (where Oenone might not have received his new consort kindly), but for Troy.

Now the oaths sworn before Helen's marriage took effect. Every prince who had sought Helen's hand was sworn to avenge the wrong done to Menelaus, and to bring Helen home. Menelaus' brother Agamemnon, King of Argos, was also eager to redress the wrong done to his kinsman. Odysseus, the shrewd King of Ithaca, saw no profit in abandoning his kingdom to bring home someone else's eloped wife. He did his best to avoid the summons by feigning insanity; the messenger sent to bring him in found him plowing a field and planting it with salt. But when the messenger, doubting the King's insanity, put the King's young son Telemachus in the way of the plow, the King turned the blade aside with a look of horror, and the messenger, convinced of his sanity, compelled him to join the Greek army.

A great fleet assembled at the harbor of Aulis, and a great army waited to embark. At first the omens seemed good; they saw two eagles of different colors tearing apart a hare newly delivered of her young, and a prophet told them that the kings were the diverse kings of Greece, who would destroy the city of Troy and the women and children in it to revenge Paris' breach of hospitality. At this the war-

leaders rejoiced and waited eagerly for a favorable wind. And they waited, and waited, and waited; for the wind was foul, straight from the North, bound to wreck any vessel which tried to set forth, day after day and week after week. The fighting men fretted; the ships' tackle rotted in constant rains. The prophet was sent for again and urged to explain the evil fate that followed his fair omen.

Once again he had an explanation. Artemis, the protector of wild things and young things, was bitterly angry at the slaughter of the hare and her young (and perhaps also, though he did not clearly say so, at the foreshadowed and welcomed slaughter of the children of Troy.) Only one thing would appease her: Agamemnon and his host might set forth to the slaughter if Agamemnon would begin by killing his own child, his maiden daughter Iphigenia.

Agamemnon protested first that the words were bitter and that all the ways opened to him were wrong—either to hold back from the war, forget his brother's injury and break his oath, or to kill his daughter who was the beauty and the glory of his house. But he chose to kill his child and wage his war. He sent word back to his wife and queen Clytemnestra in Argos that Achilles, one of the greatest warriors of Greece, wished to wed Iphigenia to set a seal on the alliance of their houses before they went to war together. Clytemnestra willingly sent the girl on her way, well attended, excited and dressed in wedding finery. When they came to the temple and Iphigenia understood what role her father actually meant for her she pleaded with him, and with the other nobles there who had been guests in her house and heard her singing at their feasts. But Agamemnon ordered her gagged and killed.

Straightway the wind set fair for Troy. The Greeks set sail, shamed by the deed they had witnessed and consented to, and burning all the more fiercely to achieve the aim for which they had done it. And a distraught messenger rode back to Argos to tell Queen Clytemnestra of the manner of her daughter's death, that she might grieve and plot revenge.

Notes:

Most of the tale of the Trojan War itself comes from Homer's *Iliad*, but parts of the story of its beginning are told in Euripides' play *The Trojan Women* (which describes what the goddesses offered to Paris) and Aeschylus' play *Agamemnon* (which describes the omens and prophecies and the killing of Iphigenia.) I've followed Edith Hamilton's summary and integration of the founding curse on the House of Atreus and on Helen's marriage, but since I found her account of Iphigenia and the omens confusing I went back to the source in Aeschylus. (Though another source says that the curse came, not from the omen-birds, but from Agamemnon's thoughtless killing of

a hare newly delivered of young.)

The telling here is mine, but the sense of the waste the war brought, and the terrible symmetry of requiring the leader of the war-makers to kill his own child before setting off to kill others, come from the sources. Homer describes Ares the war-god often in bitterly unflattering terms, and many of the plays which deal with the matter of Troy are steeped in sorrow; we will see more of this in later chapters.

Later Greek authors seem to have been distressed by the tale of the killing of Iphigenia, and by the idea that the gods could demand human sacrifice. We'll see one way in which they dealt with that in chapter 9.

Chapter 4 – The Battle for Troy

The war for Troy was long, fierce and bitter. The Greeks had brought a vast army with powerful mixed motives--they were driven by their vows, by their righteous indignation at Paris' breach of hospitality, and their guilt in Iphigenia's death, and perhaps also, in some cases, by their own frustrated longing for Helen. But Troy was a well-fortified city, and the Trojans had their homes to defend, and they fought as fiercely as the Greeks.

Each side had its champion—not, in either case, one of the actual contenders for Helen's hand. The leader of the Greek forces was Agamemnon, but the greatest warrior among them was Achilles. Achilles' father was a mortal man, but his mother, Thetis, was a Nereid, a water-spirit. Some poets say that when Achilles was a baby his mother dipped him in the holy river Styx to make him invulnerable. She held him by his heel; where her hand covered his skin the water did not touch it and he remained vulnerable to a deathblow. Thetis knew before her son set out for Troy that the protection she had given him was limited, and she foresaw that he would die in that war. Hoping against hope to change his fate, she tried to disguise him as a girl to stop him leaving for Troy, but Odysseus saw through the disguise, and Achilles was eager enough to go into battle, where he was handily able to defeat anyone who attacked him (thanks to his mother's protection as well as his own strength and skill.)

Nearly his match was the Trojan warrior Hector, brother of Paris and son of Priam. Priam was too old to take the field himself, so Hector took his place in the battles. Hector did not want the war he was compelled to lead. He loathed his brother's treacherous action and saw no purpose in risking all their lives to keep Helen from her lawful husband. He was a mortal not a god, but he saw clearly enough that he would die and Troy would fall. Nevertheless he felt honor-bound to defend his people as long as he could. For years he and his army kept the Greeks at bay. There were great deeds of heroism in that war, dangerous rescues of wounded comrades, brave and unequal fights where the weaker party refused to flee or to beg—and there was a great waste of life. The heroes of Greece and Troy died and died and died in an endless bloody stalemate. The children of Troy grew up afraid, and the children of the Greeks grew up fatherless.

There was strife in heaven as well as on earth; the Olympians were not unmoved by the suffering of the combatants below, but their sympathies and their aid were divided. Aphrodite was on Paris' side, of course, since he had proclaimed her the most beautiful of the goddesses; her lover Ares naturally took her part—and, being the god

of war, he was capable of rendering very effective assistance. Hera and Athena, feeling slighted by Paris, naturally took the part of the Greeks. Athena in any case took a sympathetic interest in Odysseus, who had a strategic mind not unlike her own. Poseidon's sympathies were with the Greeks, since the Greeks were frequent sailors and therefore paid great homage to the sea-god. Zeus on the whole inclined to favor the Trojans, but he didn't take a very active hand, not wanting to enrage his wife.

After one fight the Greeks managed to turn Apollo against them by capturing Chryseis, the daughter of one of Apollo's priests, and giving her to Agamemnon as a concubine. When her father came to plead for her release Agamemnon turned him away with proud words. The priest, having failed to sway men, begged Apollo to right the wrong. Apollo listened. He was the god of healing, but he also had the power to inflict sickness; he shot plague-laced arrows into the Greek army so that they moaned and shivered in their tents, and men who had survived the carnage before the walls of Troy died in their beds as their bodies disintegrated. Finally the army, led by Achilles, demanded that Agamemnon send the girl back before they all died. Agamemnon was angry and ashamed. At last he agreed to release the girl. Her father took her home again, and the plague ceased; but the damage was not done yet.

Agamemnon vowed to redeem his shame by claiming the woman whom Achilles had seized for his own, the beautiful Briseis. He sent armed men to take her from Achilles' tent. The messengers feared Achilles' anger and told him plainly that they were ashamed of their errand; but Achilles sent the girl with them and didn't attack them, saying he knew well enough where the blame lay. Thereafter he shut himself in his tent, nursed his wounded pride and refused to fight in Agamemnon's army. He ignored most of his fellow Greeks, though he spent as much time as he could with his comely and well-mannered young friend Patroclus, whom he loved dearly.

Achilles' mother Thetis was as angry as he was. She went to Zeus and demanded that he punish Agamemnon. He was willing to oblige, though he could hardly intervene with a thunderbolt without Hera taking notice and blaming him. Instead he made Agamemnon dream that if he went out to attack Troy without Achilles he would take the city, shame Achilles, and have all the glory for himself.

The Greeks attacked, and the Trojans pushed them back; first one side, then another rallied. At last when both the armies were exhausted someone made the sensible, if belated, suggestion that the two claimants for Helen's hand should fight it out themselves. The armies fell back, and Paris and Menelaus faced each other. Paris was the first to strike, but Menelaus fought harder; when his sword broke in his

hand he seized Paris with his bare hands and would have killed him then and there if Aphrodite had not intervened, taking Paris up in a cloud and hiding him in safety. Menelaus stormed through the Trojan ranks looking for Paris. Eventually the Trojans managed to convince him, truthfully, that they despised Paris and weren't trying to protect him—they simply didn't know where he was. Agamemnon then said that, missing or not, Paris had clearly lost, and the Trojans should hand Helen over .

This was fair, and by now both sides were sick of war, so the Trojans agreed; and Hector at least was glad, thinking less of the glory of war or the shame of defeat than of his wife and children being able to sleep in peace. But Hera and Athena wanted to see Troy destroyed, not just to see Paris deprived of Helen. Athena persuaded one foolish Trojan to shoot an arrow at Menelaus as he walked away from the place where they had made terms. That archer's aim was no better than his judgment, and Menelaus was only slightly wounded, but the Greeks were outraged and attacked with redoubled vigor. Diomedes, their best fighter in Achilles' absence, pressed the battle hard toward the walls of Troy, recoiling only when he saw Ares the war-god himself fighting at Hector's side. Diomedes was brave but not foolhardy; he knew the gods could not be fought, and he urged the Greeks to make an orderly retreat. But Hera was furious at this and asked Zeus if he wouldn't permit her to do something about Ares, that scourge and bully. Zeus gave permission, and Athena hurried to Diomedes' side, urging him to attack again. He did so, and his spear, guided by Athena, pierced Ares' side.

Now Ares loved to drive men to wounding and death in war, but he was used to being invulnerable himself. He gave a great and terrible howl of pain that made both the Greeks and the Trojans shudder, and he fled back to Olympus howling and complaining. He got no sympathy at all from either of his parents.

Then Diomedes and the Greeks surged forward, and it seemed that they might take Troy itself, but Hector, braver than Ares, rallied his men to resist them. The Greeks pressed hard but could not break through that desperate resistance, and at length they drew back. But one of Hector's brothers saw that the gods had turned against them. He asked Hector to go back to his mother, Hecuba the old Queen, and urge her to plead with the gods for mercy on the innocents of Troy.

Hector went, and Hecuba listened to her son. She offered gifts to Athena and prayed that Athena might pity the women and children of Troy. But Athena did not listen, and Hecuba left the temple in despair. Hector found Paris sitting at home with Helen, reproached him with bitter words and persuaded him to go back to the fight. Helen cursed herself for bringing destruction on her people, but also described

herself as the hapless and helpless victim of the gods. She urged Hector to stay behind with her, but he hurried away, saying that he had to return to the battle as soon as he had spoken with Andromache, his beloved wife. Andromache begged him not to go back to the open battle, but to stay in a safer place and guard a weak spot in the city walls. She reminded him that Achilles had already killed her father and her brothers, and Hector was all she had left in the world to love—and she saw too plainly that his courage would be the death of him; nor did she wish to live after him.

Hector loved his wife dearly, and he would not lie to her even for her comfort. He told her plainly that he knew what she knew: he would die, Troy would fall, many of its people would be killed, and Andromache herself would be carried into exile and slavery. He could not forestall that fate by holding back in the fight, so he preferred to fight among the foremost, and to die before he saw harm come to his wife and children. He embraced his wife then, and he held out his arms to his little son Astyanax, but the boy was afraid of the war-helm; so Hector unhelmed and then took the boy in his arms and prayed for the gods to bless him. Then he sent Andromache home, telling her that the times of all men's deaths were fated and not to be avoided. That was a comfortless parting.

But when Hector took up the battle again he had a god at his side once more—not Ares this time, but Zeus himself, driven by Thetis' entreaties. With Zeus' encouragement, and with Achilles still sulking behind the battle lines, the Trojans swept all before them and drove the Greeks back nearly to their ships. Agamemnon's army was saved only by the fall of night.

In the darkness the Greeks went to Agamemnon again and told him that his proud mistreatment of Achilles would cost them all their lives. Agamemnon admitted reluctantly that he had once again been in the wrong, and he sent messengers to Achilles, offering to restore Briseis to him and to add many rich gifts if only Achilles would return to war. Patroclus thought their words were good, but Achilles would have none of it; he cared more for his injured pride than for the girl or for his sometime comrades-in-arms. He was sailing for home soon, he told the messengers, and if they had any sense they'd do the same. The messengers brought that answer back. The Greeks were near despairing then, but they were unwilling to leave ignominiously, without Helen and also without many of the men who had sailed with them, and they steeled themselves for a desperate and probably losing battle.

Hera saw all this and was angry. She went to Zeus, who had prepared himself to bear her reproaches. Zeus was surprised, and then delightfully distracted, when she came to him instead with soft smiles,

come-hither glances and very beautiful clothing which also seemed ready to come off very easily. He lay in her arms as the day rose and the battle was joined, and her beauty distracted him from the doings of mortals. Poseidon, noting his brother's absence, fought on the Greek side, and once again they drove the Trojan army back nearly to the walls of Troy. Hector was knocked senseless; his friends dragged him to safety, but the Trojans feared and gave way.

Then the desperate Trojans called on Zeus, who looked away from Hera and saw his war being lost. He blamed her, and she blamed Poseidon; Zeus ordered his brother god to withdraw, and the order was reluctantly obeyed. Hector was on his feet again by then, and he led the Trojans in another desperate charge back, and back, and back toward the Greek ships. The defensive wall the Greeks had built was thrown down. A little more and the Trojans would be able to burn the ships themselves, and slaughter the Greeks at their leisure; Hector's fears seemed all unfounded...

Patroclus saw what was happening and cried out to Achilles not to let his pride kill them all. Achilles would not listen, but at this extreme Patroclus would not hold with his friend. He stole out of Achilles' tent, put on Achilles' resplendent armor, and swept out to fight. Seeing him, the Greeks gave a cry of joy, and they fought with new hope; and some of the Trojans doubted and gave way. Now the tide of battle surged toward the walls of Troy again .

Hector knew that Achilles was his overmatch, but he stood before him anyway, beginning a desperate fight. He was surprised when "Achilles" fell before him. Hector took up Achilles' armor, which was better than his own, and looked wonderingly at the dead face of Patroclus. Then he strode back into the thick of the fighting, and all fled before him. The Greeks might all have died that day if nightfall had not saved them.

Achilles sat in his tent waiting for his friend who never came. Instead, a messenger came, exhausted and weeping, bearing the news of Patroclus' death.

Achilles grieved bitterly, and he loathed Hector for killing Patroclus and himself for not being there to protect his dear friend. He vowed to revenge himself on Hector immediately. His mother Thetis reminded him that his death was fated to follow Hector's. So much the better, Achilles said, since he had left Patroclus to die unaided. He would not take his mother's advice, but he did take another gift from her: weapons and armor made by Hephaestus, the smith of the gods.

Notes:

This narrative is basically taken from Homer's *Iliad* . Some other primary sources for the stories of the Trojan War and its aftermath are

listed at the end of the next chapter.

Chapter 5 – The Death of Hector and the Fall of Troy

Early in the morning after Patroclus' death Achilles went out to his fellow Greeks, repented of his pride and folly, and said he would lead them in battle again—would lead them into battle immediately. Odysseus, ever a practical man, said they'd better eat first and then fight; the others, weary from long fighting, agreed, but Achilles, still mad with grief, waited fasting and then urged them to the field as soon as ever he could.

There was no doubt as to the outcome of the last battle. Zeus had weighed the matter out on his scales and decreed that Troy would fall. This was not exactly accepted without demur by the gods—Athena had to knock Ares down to stop him trying to interfere—but in the end they saw that it was past changing.

When the Trojans saw Achilles himself in the front of the battle, and saw his weapons and armor, which were clearly made by no mortal smith, they also knew their war was lost. They fought all the more fiercely for that, thinking of what would happen to their families; but Achilles was unstoppable, and slowly, slowly they fell back, and the great gates of Troy opened so they could flee inside. Only Hector stayed outside the wall. He thought whether there was still a chance to get the Greeks to take Helen and a great deal of treasure beside and leave Troy in peace; then he thought of Patroclus' death and Achilles' rage and concluded that they would accept no peace terms, that all he could do was fight to the end. That resolve held until Achilles advanced to meet him, and Hector saw Athena standing at Achilles' side. Then he turned and fled—not through the city gates, which had been shut to keep the Greeks out, but around the city walls. At last he thought he saw his brother Deiphobus standing and waiting for him. Then, believing that he was not alone, he turned back to face Achilles, asking only that they agree that the loser of their fight should be returned to his own people for honorable burial. This Achilles refused; and when Hector turned back to his brother, he saw no one there but Athena, grimly smiling, and he knew he had been deceived.

The last fight was fierce but short. Hector was a skilled warrior, but Achilles' god-forged armor resisted all blows, and Athena was ever at hand to return his spear to him when he cast it, while Hector fought alone in mortal-made armor. Small wonder, then, that Achilles killed him. But Achilles was not satisfied with Hector's death. He stripped Hector of his armor. The other Greeks marveled at Hector's beauty and strength; but Achilles tied Hector's body behind his chariot horses and dragged it round the walls of Troy while his old parents watched

from the walls and wept. Then he swore that he would throw what was left of Hector's body to the dogs near Patroclus' funeral pyre.

This offended the gods, even some of those who had taken the part of the Greeks. The gods' messenger Iris flew to Hector's father Priam and urged him to go to Achilles and beg for his son's body. This Priam did, loving his son more than he loved his own pride or honor or life. He brought rich gifts with him, and he knelt before Achilles, saying bitterly that he knew no other man who had begged for grace from his son's killer.

Achilles saw grief greater than his own, and his fury died away. He covered what was left of Hector with a rich robe and returned the remains to Priam, promising to hold off the Greek attack while the Trojans mourned and buried Hector. So Priam returned, and Hector's funeral pyre was built, and for nine days the fighting ceased and the Trojans mourned for Hector and for themselves.

When the days of mourning ended King Memnon of Ethiopia came to help the Trojans, and Troy had another breathing space. Achilles killed Memnon, but he was killed. No one was able to beat him in swordplay, but Paris shot an arrow at him which pierced the heel which Thetis had held when she dipped him in the Styx to make him invincible. Paris was killed soon after, but his death was not such a crushing loss to the Trojans as Achilles' was to the Greeks. It does not seem to have been a crushing loss to Helen either; she promptly married Paris' brother Deiphobus.

Deprived of their best warrior, the Greeks decided that they could not win the war by main force. Nor could they wait forever locked in endless battle, while their children and their realms struggled along without them. Nigh on ten years they had fought before the walls of Troy, and now they were resolved to make an end by any means possible. They consulted prophets, stole a precious relic of Athena's from the Trojans, and tried other esoteric ways of gaining the gods' favor; this didn't seem to work either.

It was clever Odysseus—inspired, some say, by Athena—who came up with the stratagem that would give them victory. When he told his plan to his battle-weary comrades, they were not inclined to question its ethics. Some, indeed, found it too dangerous, but Odysseus was able to persuade them that the greater danger was in letting the war drag on for ten more years.

For several days the Greeks gave more attention to carpentry than to fighting, and the Trojans, equally exhausted, were glad to let the fighting slacken. Then one morning the Trojan sentries looked out toward the Greek camps and cried out in surprise, for the Greek ships were gone, and the often-repaired defensive wall was thrown down. In

their place was an immense wooden statue of a horse, carefully wrought and gilded .

The watchers exclaimed in joy. There were only four people who looked with doubt. The priest Laocoon said that he mistrusted Greeks and their gifts, and Priam's daughter Cassandra, a prophetess devoted to Apollo, said urgently that their enemies had not left but had hidden themselves in the horse. Nobody heeded Cassandra. Nobody ever had. Apollo, falling in love with her beauty, had given her the gift of foreseeing the future. When she refused to become his lover, preferring to remain a virgin, he was furious. It was impossible to revoke his gift, but he turned it into a curse by adding that no one would ever believe her words. Thereafter even her mother thought she was a madwoman, and all her warnings were in vain. Laocoon was not under such a curse, but he was outnumbered. Still, men went out with him to investigate, in case an ambush was planned; but as they searched through what was left of the camp they found only one Greek, a wretched-looking man who prostrated himself at their feet, named himself Sinon and said that he no longer wished to be a Greek. They were curious enough, or relieved enough, to ask him why instead of killing him on the spot. The leaders of Troy gathered around him as he told his story.

Athena, Sinon said, had been furious when the Greeks stole her relic from Troy, and she told them plainly that she no longer fought on their side—that the best they could hope for was to get home alive, and even that blessing would be granted them only at a high price. When they asked the price, she told them it was a human sacrifice that had cleared their way to Troy, and another such must clear their way home; and Sinon was chosen as the victim. Through no fault of his own, of course—why, was wrong had Iphigenia ever had the chance to do? Sinon said that he had fled in terror and hidden himself until the Greeks were gone, and he didn't know or wish to know if they had killed some other hapless innocent in his place, but in any case they were gone.

Oh, and about the horse: the departing Greeks had realized Athena wasn't the only deity they had to placate; they were going home by sea, after all, and they would need Poseidon's favor. So they built the wooden horse—Poseidon, after all, was the maker of horses as well as the god of the sea—as an offering to him, and they made it so huge that they thought the Trojans couldn't take it into the city and gain the gods' favor for themselves. They hoped, in fact, that the Trojans would destroy the horse, thus incurring Poseidon's everlasting anger... Most of the Trojans began to consider the best ways of moving the great horse into their city and claiming the blessing for themselves. Laocoon and his two sons spoke against this plan, but Poseidon, who

had always favored the Greeks, sent sea-serpents to crush them. The Trojans saw what looked to them like the destruction of the impious, and they resolved to bring the horse into their city and to honor it.

The horse was brought in with singing and dancing and great joy. People who had lived under the shadow of death, who had hoped chiefly to die bravely--or at least quickly--when the time came, believed themselves reprieved. They brought thank-offerings to all the temples, and they sang and danced and feasted around the great horse, and at last they lay down to sleep in peace for the first time in ten years .

In the dead of night Odysseus and the other Greek captains who had hidden themselves inside the horse opened a hatch, climbed down, and hurried to the great gates of Troy. These were easy enough to open from the inside. The rest of the Greek army, which had sailed only far enough to pass out of sight behind the nearest cape, had marched to the gates in the darkness, and they poured in like a flood tide. They went stealthily until all were in; then they begin to shout, to loot, to kill and to burn.

This was a massacre, not a battle. Many of the Trojans hardly had time to wake before they died--or, in the case of some of the women and children, were bound and led away. Others who could not have fought--women, children, old men and women--were killed anyway by Greeks bitter over the deaths of their friends, or simply drunk on victory. Some people sought sanctuary in the temples of the gods. It did them no good. Old Priam was killed on the steps of the altar of Zeus while his wife and daughter looked on from the arms of their captors, unable to help. Cassandra was dragged out of the temple of Athena by a Greek who simply saw a pretty girl and thought nothing of prophecy or madness or the vengeance of the gods. A few of the Trojans woke in time to fight, and to do more damage than might have been expected with such unequal odds; but by morning all those who had offered resistance, and many of those who had not, were dead.

Most of the Trojan women who survived tried to comfort each other, though none were certain how to do that. Many had been piously raised and were used to commending sufferers to the mercy of the gods, but now their piety appeared unavailing and the gods whom they had honored appeared altogether without mercy. And as for what was to come... there was considerable disagreement over whether forced concubinage, or slave labor, or death was the worst fate; also on whether courage was best shown by cursing the Greeks and so keeping faith with their own dead loved ones, or by accepting their fates with uncomplaining dignity. Hecuba recommended the latter course to her daughter Andromache, Hector's widow, when the Greek

captains announced that Andromache had been given to Achilles' son—though Hecuba herself wished only to die. Cassandra had been claimed by Agamemnon, and at first she scandalized her mother Hecuba by talking of wedding dances and sounding glad of where she was bound. Hecuba was not much relieved when Cassandra added that her happiness was due to the fact that her new lord would soon die as miserably as any of his victims. Hecuba presumed this was Cassandra's 'madness' speaking again.

Menelaus' appearance temporarily settled all lesser disagreements. Helen was brought out to face the husband she had left, and the other Trojan women turned on her, accused her of being the cause of all the slaughter and loss, and urged Menelaus to kill her. Helen argued that none of it had been her fault. Aphrodite had forced her to fall in love, and who could gainsay the gods? Besides, she told Menelaus, if Paris had chosen Athena, she would have helped him conquer the Greeks, and he'd probably be dead or a slave, worse fates than temporarily losing a wife. Besides, she told Hecuba, if Priam had only killed Paris as soon as he heard the prophecy, none of this would have happened, so it was really Priam's fault.. .

This line of argument did not endear her to her Trojan hearers. Menelaus said that he wasn't convinced either and that she would be executed after his return to Greece. But he looked at Helen as he spoke, and saw her beauty still unchanged—and many of the stories say that when they returned home they lived together until they died of old age, and even that they were happy.

Less happiness awaited the rest of the women of Troy. Hecuba's youngest daughter Polixena was killed at the tomb of Achilles, and Hector's infant son Astyanax was killed as well, in fear that someday he might grow up to avenge his father. Astyanax's mother Andromache was hurried away by her new lord before she could even see her son buried. It was left to his grandmother Hecuba to bury him, and to watch as the Greeks torched the remains of the city. Under that wing of smoke she led the last of her people away to a new life of slavery and remembrance.

Notes:

Homer's account in the *Iliad* ends with the burial of Hector. The story of the Trojan Horse is told fully in the second book of Virgil's *Aeneid* (I've drawn on Edith Hamilton's summary of that account in her *Mythology*) and also largely in Euripides' achingly sad play *The Trojan Women*, which also speaks of the sack of Troy and the fate of its survivors.

Euripides wrote several other tragedies about the Trojan War, including *Helen* and *Andromache*, as well as the *Agamemnon* and

Iphigenia plays which provided some of the material for the chapters that follow.

It's striking that the tales of the Trojan War are mostly told by Greek writers (except for Virgil, who wrote in Latin), and they are told about a Greek victory, but they are told with horror at the manner of that victory and with considerable sympathy for the vanquished. Also that Hector, the champion of Troy not Greece, is the most admirable man in the tales.

For the full meaning of Cassandra's prophecy about Agamemnon, see Chapter 7, which describes Agamemnon's homecoming. But in the meantime we will turn to another famously (and perhaps deservedly) difficult, dangerous and delayed homecoming, that of Odysseus.

Chapter 6 – Odysseus' Long Way Home

The Greeks had their victory, but their way of seizing it had displeased the gods. Even Athena, the persistent champion of the Greeks, was furious because Cassandra had been dragged away from her altar. Athena went to Zeus, then to Poseidon, and complained bitterly; and she was heard. Zeus lent her his thunderbolt, and Poseidon kept the sea calm until the Greek fleet was well away from land, then whipped it into a terrible tempest. The roaring of the thunder and the roaring of the sea were deafening, and the lightning was as blinding as the darkness under the storm clouds. The petty captain who had seized Cassandra from the temple drowned in that tempest, and Agamemnon, who had claimed Cassandra for a concubine despite her vow of virginity, came near to drowning too. When his ships at last limped out from under the storm-clouds and made their way homeward he might have felt himself forgiven by the gods, and if Cassandra told him otherwise he listened to her no more than anybody else had. Menelaus and Helen survived the storm, but their ship was driven far off course, to the shores of Egypt.

As for Odysseus, King of Ithaca, who had devised the Trojan Horse and also urged the killing of Astyanax to prevent later revenge, his ships stayed afloat, but they were driven long in the blind darkness before strange winds. For nine days the gale blew and Odysseus and his men expected drowning at every second. When at last the storm subsided they were in strange waters, lost and hungry and thirsty.

When the lookout saw an island ahead the sailors were relieved. All the more so when the island's inhabitants came out to meet them, not with weapons in hand, but with soft smiles, gentle words, and the invitation to a feast. The food was strange—it seemed to consist mainly of lotus fruit—but the scent of it was appealing, and their hosts seemed kind, and hungry men aren't choosy. Odysseus, however, was a wary man, and he urged his sailors to hold back lest the food should be drugged or poisoned. Most of them listened to him; it was abundantly clear to them all that they were in disgrace with the gods, and any foul thing might happen. But a few were impatient, or trusting, enough to join the feast immediately. Immediately the same soft smiles their hosts had shown spread over their faces. When their still-hungry companions spoke of getting more fresh water on board the ship so they could sail for home, the men who had eaten the lotus stared at them. Home? they said. Why would they want to go anywhere else? No, the thing was simply to stay, and to eat, and to be glad. What else could any man want? When Odysseus ordered them to leave at once they shook their heads and wept.

Odysseus' sober sailors bound their sedated comrades and dragged

them back to the ships, where they lay passively lamenting. The rest of the crew made haste to sail away from that cursed shore.

By the time they reached the next island, they were hungry indeed. That seemed to be a pleasant country, the grass thick and short and full of sweet clover; and not too far from the beach they found a cave which seemed to be the dwelling of a farmer or dairyman, for there were pails of milk and great cheeses laid out on shelves. Cautious sampling revealed no intoxicating effects from either milk or cheese, and the famished men feasted. Odysseus brought a skin of very good wine in from the ship to give their unknown host in exchange for his hospitality.

But when their host returned, driving his sheep flock ahead of him, he showed himself to be no mortal man but a giant one-eyed Cyclops who named himself Polyphemus, glared balefully at them and asked if they were sea-pirates or land-thieves who had thus made themselves at home and eaten his food without his leave. Odysseus said they were neither, but poor shipwrecked men and beggars who were, like all other beggars, under Zeus' protection. (Did he remember then the people in Troy who had begged for their lives and gone unheard?) The Cyclops shrugged and said that he feared no gods and he'd eat the men who had eaten his food. With that he rolled a great boulder over the door, locking them all in (for their combined strength would never have served to shift that stone), and proceeded to kill and eat two of Odysseus' men. He did the same thing in the morning, before letting his flock out to graze, leaving with them and sealing his prisoners inside again.

The men lamented the death of their comrades and shuddered at the thought of their turn coming. Odysseus thought frantically. When Polyphemus returned he had a plan; he also had a great timber with one end burned to a sharp point. Odysseus hid the timber, offered the wine to Polyphemus and got him most satisfactorily drunk. When the giant's head lolled, Odysseus and his men brought out the timber and thrust the sharp point into Polyphemus' eye. Polyphemus woke too late to save his sight. He bellowed and he felt about the cave for his tormentors, but they had hidden themselves under the bellies of the sheep. They stayed hidden, trapped in the cave with the blind and furious giant, all that night. In the morning when he let the sheep out, Polyphemus felt about him for the shapes of fleeing men, but they stayed hidden under the sheep and escaped safely to their waiting ship.

It seemed a fortunate escape, but it came at a price—not only the deaths of Polyphemus' victims, but also the anger of Poseidon; for some stories say that this particular Cyclops was Poseidon's son and dear to him, and Poseidon vowed to inflict long misery on the men

who had harmed his son.

Their next landfall was more fortunate: King Aeolus, keeper of the winds, welcomed Odysseus and his men, and gave Odysseus a very valuable parting gift—a bag into which all the dangerous winds which might afflict a sailing vessel had been sealed. Odysseus took the gift thankfully, but failed to explain its contents to his crew; they saw him stow it away like a precious thing, thought it was gold, and opened it, losing another violent storm which drove them all onto the shores of an island populated by ferocious giants who destroyed all the ships but the one which Odysseus himself sailed.

The sailors who survived were in a cautious mood. When they came to land again, a small party crept inland to investigate while the others stayed on the ship, ready to sail away quickly. Odysseus and the crew waited for the return of the scouts, and waited, and waited. Finally one man, Eurylochus, came back, wild-eyed and weeping. Odysseus, seeing no pursuers, asked for an explanation, which Eurylochus gave.

First the scouts had met with foul beasts, with wolves and panthers—but instead of growling and attacking, or slinking away into the wilds, the beasts had fawned on them and wagged their tails. While the men stared at the beasts in doubt and fear, they heard sweet music ahead of them. Hurrying on, they saw a lovely palace built in a forest glade, and inside they heard a woman singing beautifully. When they knocked at the door the woman opened to them, smiled at them, and urged them to come in and refresh themselves. All but Eurylochus took up the invitation; he backed away, fearing the woman more than he had feared the beasts. And in this, it seems, he was wise; for he waited long and his comrades never came out again. For a little while he heard their voices raised in rough song and laughter, and then he heard only grunting as of swine, and the woman's sweet voice rising and falling. Dread struck his heart and he fled back to the ship alone.

Odysseus took up his bow and sword and told Eurylochus to lead him to the house. But Eurylochus knelt and clasped Odysseus' feet and begged with tears to be excused from going back to that terrible place. He knew, he said, that if Odysseus went there he would not return either; surely the best course was for them to sail away...

But Odysseus was loath to go when his men might still be alive and in the power of a sorceress. He left Eurylochus at the ship and strode up into the land alone, for none of his men were willing to follow him.

As he went a handsome young man met him and asked what he did alone and astray in a dangerous country. The youth—whom Odysseus recognized as Hermes—told him that his men were penned in a pigpen, and in the bodies of pigs, and that Odysseus could expect no better fate himself if he went unprotected into Circe's house, for Circe

mixed her food and drink with potions that stripped men of their human bodies—though not of their human minds and their human shame. But Hermes gave Odysseus an antidote, and told him to take it and then eat and drink freely; only when he had eaten and drunk and Circe took out her wand to complete the spell of shape-changing, Odysseus should draw his sword and threaten to kill her if she did not restore his comrades.

Odysseus followed the god's instructions. But when she saw that her charms had not changed Odysseus, Circe looked on him with love, and she willingly restored his men and prepared another and unpoisoned feast for them and for all the ship's company; and that night she took Odysseus for her lover (after swearing a great and binding oath that she would work no enchantments on him when he was naked and unarmed.) For a year they stayed on Circe's isle in peace, healing their wounds, their hunger and their horrors; and then Odysseus' sailors began to long for their homes and their families again, and they urged Odysseus to set sail for Ithaca, and he agreed..

Circe's charms were potent on her own island, but she could not protect Odysseus on the long voyage home. She could and did give him some excellent advice. The only one who could teach him a safe way home, she said, was the prophet Teiresias, who was unfortunately dead. But she could teach Odysseus a way to come to the house of Hades living, and to summon to him the spirits of the dead.

Odysseus had gone willingly to rescue his men from an enchantress, but he greatly feared Hades. Still at last he consented to go, and persuaded his men that the only way home lay through the land of horror. At last they all agreed to go where Circe had directed him, and they took ship—all but one young man, Elpenor, who drank too much on his leave-taking night and in the morning fell from the roof in his haste to depart.

Odysseus' company sailed north before a favorable wind—perhaps a gift from Circe—until they reached the dark groves of Persephone and the meeting of two black rivers before the house of Hades. There Odysseus sacrificed many animals and filled a trench with their blood, and the thirsty shades of the dead smelled the blood and came out to drink—bloodstained men killed in battles that were forgotten before Odysseus was born; children, staring and perplexed; young women, some who might have been beautiful had they not been death-pale... Odysseus shook with horror, but he drew his sword and told them all to stay back from the blood until Tiresias' shade had come to speak with him. And they waited, staring.

Before Tiresias came two shades Odysseus knew well. One was young Elpenor, crying out for Odysseus to give him an honorable funeral pyre and say the death-prayers over him as he returned by Circe's isle

on his way home—which Odysseus promised to do. The other was Odysseus' mother; she had been living when Odysseus sailed for Troy, and his first knowledge of her death came from the appearance of her thirsty shade. He spoke to her with love and grief, but he kept her back from the blood until Tiresias came.

Tiresias knelt and drank, and he told Odysseus of many perils waiting on the homeward road; but he also promised that Odysseus would come home alive at the end of that road. After he spoke Odysseus sheathed his sword and the host of the dead crowded round the blood. Achilles was there, and Ajax, and... Odysseus knew and mourned too many dead men, and the sight of them in their sad change was more than he could bear. He fled back to his ship, and his men fled with him; but no man ever mocked him with cowardice for that flight. And as he went he thought of what his mother had told him: that she had died of grief at his long absence, and that at the time of her death his wife Penelope still loved and waited for him .

So he hurried homeward, through the perils that had to be passed. He stopped at Circe's isle only long enough to perform Elpenor's funeral rites, and to receive Circe's additions to Tiresias' guidance for the journey. Then they were on their way again, forewarned and forearmed.

The first peril they passed was the strangest, and might have been the death of them all if Circe had not warned them. Their ship passed close to a beautiful island full of flowers, and from that island a song spilled out over the water toward the ship, a song sweeter than Circe's own. Circe had told them that the singers were women who sat on splendid thrones surrounded by the bodies of men who had been drawn to their song and died of thirst and hunger which the music hid from them. So when the ship passed near the island of the Sirens, Odysseus put plugs of wax in the ears of all his men; he himself kept his ears open, but he made his men tie him hand and foot to the mast so that he could not leap overboard and swim to the Sirens. This precaution proved to be entirely necessary. The music of the Sirens was entrancing, their words even more so, for they sang that they had knowledge of all things that had been or that would be, and those who came to them learned wisdom. Hearing this, Odysseus no longer cared for Circe's warnings, and he strained to free himself—on which his men, according to his earlier orders, tied him more tightly, until the wind had carried them far past the perilous isle.

He told his men only half of the next danger that faced them. They had to pass through a narrow strait. On one side was a terrible whirlpool called Charybdis which sucked down ships entire and spit them back as scraps of matchwood and bone; on the other, a cave inhabited by the six-headed and man-devouring monster Scylla.

Odysseus told the crew to keep to the side away from Charybdis, but saw no good in warning them of Scylla, since Circe had told him that she could not be fought. Still, when they came to the passage Odysseus took up his spears and strained his eyes through the fog and gloom to see her; but the first he knew of her presence was the sudden darting down of six terrible heads on long serpentine necks to the ships' deck. These reared up and away before Odysseus could strike, and each set of jaws gripped a hapless member of his crew, screaming for help that no man could give. The oarsmen rowed frantically, the ship shot out from the strait, and the screaming faded from the sailors' ears, if not from their minds.

After that they came to another pleasant-looking land, which Odysseus knew for the island of the sun-god (not Apollo, in this tale, but Helios.) Circe and Tiresias both had warned him against stopping on that isle, for the flocks and herds who lived there were sacred to the sun-god and any man who killed and ate them would be terribly punished. So Odysseus ordered his men to sail on by. But Eurylochus cried out against him for a harsh man who cared nothing for the suffering and weariness of his men, and the rest of the crew—perhaps holding the unannounced appearance of Scylla against their lord—held with Eurylochus and insisted on making landfall. They did promise Odysseus that they would not kill any of the cattle or sheep on the island, but would content themselves with the provisions Circe had packed in their ship and with whatever wild food they could hunt or gather .

They drew in the ship then, and they rested, and they wept for their dead. But in the morning the wind had turned against them, and they could not set sail again with any hope of reaching home. The winds continued contrary for a month; all Circe's provisions were eaten, and the men were reduced to fishing and hunting for small game, which was none too plentiful. At last Odysseus went inland alone to pray to the gods for mercy and a favorable wind. He prayed a little while, and then he slept.

While he was gone Eurylochus spoke to his shipmates again, urging that death came to every man, but starvation was surely the worst form of death: therefore, he said, they should kill and eat some of the Sun's cattle, with appropriate sacrifices and with promises of rich offerings to be made at Helios' temple when they came safe home. Then if the god had mercy, all was well; and if not, they would at least have a quick death. His shipmates agreed with him, and they killed and ate.

Odysseus returned too late to prevent their rash action. For seven days he fasted and mourned and they ate good beef. On the seventh day a fair wind rose, and they took ship again. As they set out the sun shone

and the wind blew fair and all seemed well. But when they were far out in the open ocean black clouds covered the sky, the thunder pealed, and lightning struck the ship. All the men who had eaten Helios' cattle drowned; but Odysseus lashed himself to the mast and rode the wild waves. Nine days he was driven by the sea; and then at last he was tossed up on shore, and heard once again the beautiful voice of a woman.

This was no Siren and no sorceress of the black arts, but a kind-hearted sea-nymph called Odysseus who took him in, fed him, clothed him, and took him into her bed. She would refuse him nothing—except help in getting away from her island and home to Ithaca. Soon that was all Odysseus wanted. For weary years he spent his days gazing across the sea toward home, wondering what was happening to his wife and son.

Notes:

This tale, like the one that follows, comes from Homer's epic poem the *Odyssey*.

Chapter 7 – Odysseus' Homecoming

At last Athena, relenting from her fury at the sacking of Troy and the robbery from her temple, took pity on her old favorite Odysseus and brought his case before the gods, arguing that he had done no more wrong than the other Greeks, and had suffered far longer. She was able to convince them because Poseidon was not with them. They agreed to show him mercy, and ordered Calypso to free her prisoner. She consented unwillingly, helped him to build a raft, and stored it with provisions, and Odysseus started for home again over a calm sea.

The calm lasted only until Poseidon caught sight of him, whereupon he raised a storm that shattered the raft. But the goddess Ino called to Odysseus and told him that this time safety lay, not in tying himself to the wreck, but in swimming free of it. She gave him a mantle that would keep him from drowning, which he took gratefully. For two days and nights he swam, and at last the waves dropped him on land, naked, famished and exhausted. He found a hollow under some trees, buried himself in a drift of dry leaves and slept like the dead.

In the morning he woke to the sound of women laughing and calling to each other. Coming back out to the beach, he saw a throng of them bathing and washing their clothes. Most fled when they saw a naked man with haunted eyes stumbling out of the woods, but one stood and waited to hear his account of himself. He knelt before that one, praised her beauty, said that he didn't know whether she was divine or mortal, and asked her in either case to show mercy to a wretched man shipwrecked without so much as a rag to cover him.

The young woman told him to be of good cheer: she was a mortal, Nausicaä, daughter to the King and Queen of Phaacia, and their people were kind to strangers. She told him to wait while one of her maids brought clothes for him, and then to come to the court and kneel to the Queen. This he did, and he was feasted and housed for the night with no questions asked. In the morning they asked if he was ready to tell where he had come from and what he sought. He told all his tale, and they listened with wonder all the day long; and on the next morning they prepared a ship for him and rowed him home to Ithaca.

Not that the adventure ended there. Odysseus did not attempt to make a kingly arrival; instead he had the Phaecian sailors set him on a deserted beach and then row straight for home, while he went up quietly into the land to see what had happened in his absence .

The first living thing he met in his own country was a youth with shepherd's clothing and a noble face who asked him who he was and where he'd come from. Odysseus had always been a calculating man, and his long journey had not increased his trustfulness. He spun a long

, complicated and entirely false tale about himself; at the end of which the youth patted his shoulder, laughed, and was transformed before his eyes into Athena in her splendor. She laughed again and called him a sly rogue, but in no tone of condemnation; then she sat him down to explain the state of affairs at home and help him plan how best to deal with them.

Athena told Odysseus that Penelope his wife and Telemachus his son (who had been a very small boy when Odysseus was compelled to sail for Troy) had never given up hope of his return. During the ten years of inconclusive battle before Troy they had the company of many others who waited and hoped, and no one dared to insist that the Greek captains would lose their war or would not eventually return. But ten more years had crawled by since the beacon-fires flashed the news of the fall of Troy, and more than nine years since the first ship limped home out of war and tempest. With each year that passed after that Penelope and Telemachus' hopes grew frailer. And with each year pressure mounted on Penelope to marry again, so that Ithaca would have a king and protector—for who could say that a woman and a boy were fit to rule?

Penelope still maintained that Odysseus was alive and she was merely his regent. But when suitors began pouring into her house from all Ithaca, and also from the kingdoms beyond, she was hard put to it to insist on this. For the suitors, after a brief initial period of snarling at each other, made common cause enough to tell Penelope that all of them would remain billeted on her, eating the produce of Odysseus' land and bossing his servants around, until Penelope chose one of them to marry. The confidence with which they presented this demand showed her all too plainly that they believed her husband was dead and would never visit them with a vengeance.

Penelope tried piety next. She said sadly that it might well be that her dear lord and husband was dead, and that therefore she must mourn properly for him—and she could not even think of choosing or marrying a man to replace him until she had woven him a splendid shroud. The suitors let her do that. Every day she sat and wove before them. She chose to work with very fine threads, and she worked with more precision than speed, but still it seemed that before long she must finish her work, relent and choose one of them.

Eventually one of the more observant suitors noticed that, while Penelope wove and wove, the shroud hardly grew. Intense questioning of Penelope's maidservants revealed that while she wove through the day, she spent much of the night unpicking her work. Confronted with that, Penelope didn't deny it—but she didn't choose a new husband either. And in that at least the number of her suitors served her well. Marriage by rape was not unheard of, but if any of the arrogant men

settled in her house had tried that the others would have been glad to kill the offender, thereby improving their own chances. So she waited in an increasingly tense and untenable truce .

And as she waited, Telemachus grew. At first Penelope's suitors ignored the boy. But as the boy became a man, capable of ruling in his own right, his anger burned against the suitors, and they looked at him with increasing suspicion.

Athena had seen the change, and taken heed to prevent the worst. She disguised herself as a sailor and approached the house where Penelope waited and watched. The hall was strewn with drunk and quarrelsome men who paid no heed to the newcomer; but Telemachus, seeing that a guest was at the door and being ignored, hurried out to offer the stranger welcome and refreshment, and summoned servants to tend him. The newcomer accepted all with humble gratitude, and then inquired tentatively what sort of carousal he had stumbled in upon, since in his part of the world men would have been ashamed to conduct themselves so in a noble house...

Thus prompted, Telemachus poured out the whole story, and added his own anger and grief. The sailor watched him closely, made noises of sympathy and indignation, and said that if Odysseus ever reached his old home the suitors would be overpaid for their trespasses. The sailor asked then if Telemachus had thought of voyaging to seek word of his father, and suggested some people who might have wise words on the matter.

The sailor's words gladdened Telemachus' heart, and his doubts faded. He hurried back into the assembly to bespeak a ship and rowers.

The suitors had not found a way to force Penelope into marriage, but they had taken other matters into their own hands, and they told him plainly that he had no use for, no need of, and no chance of obtaining a ship. Laughing at him, they went back to their revels. Telemachus flung out of the house alone and went down to the seashore, where he stared over the waters where his father had departed such a very long time ago. He prayed to Athena, and she came to him—though he didn't recognize her, as she had taken the form of an old man named Mentor, a trusted friend of Odysseus. But Telemachus was glad enough to see Mentor, all the more so when Mentor promised to find him a ship.

That night Telemachus snuck down to the shore again with a bag of provisions, and the ship set sail. First to Pylos, where Odysseus' old friend Nestor offered good wishes but no knowledge; he did, however, suggest that Menelaus, who had had a much longer homeward voyage, might know more. So Telemachus set off for Sparta.

There both Menelaus and Helen—restored to her husband's good favor

by her beauty—made the young man welcome, and spoke warmly of Odysseus. And Menelaus added that he had been told by the son of a god that Odysseus lived, though he was the prisoner of a sea-nymph. Telemachus wept with mingled grief and relief, not knowing that by then Menelaus' news was out of date and Odysseus was on his way home.

So, Athena said, Penelope and Telemachus were alive and loyal, but the suitors were still settled like a plague of locusts in Odysseus' house, and they were more likely to kill him out of hand than to welcome him if they knew who he was. To prevent that, she gave him the appearance of an elderly beggar, though he kept the strength as well as the quick mind of Odysseus, and she sent him to ask help from a friendly swineherd, while she hurried away to call Telemachus home.

The swineherd gave food and shelter to the poor old stranger, and in the morning when Telemachus came to his hut the swineherd welcomed his young lord with joy. Then Athena distracted the swineherd and changed Odysseus back into his own shape long enough so that he could make himself known to his son and begin to lay plans. But when Telemachus left the hut for the palace, Athena at his side, Odysseus wore his aged beggar's shape again.

A little while later the old beggar appeared at the door of Penelope's house. The lady herself, as usual, was shut in her chambers, avoiding her boisterous suitors; the suitors, relaxing as usual after their meal, were glad to pass the time by mocking the poor old man on the threshold. He listened patiently to their taunts. This patience annoyed one of the suitors, who struck him. He bore the blow patiently as everything else; but the servants were shocked and ran to tell Penelope that a stranger, a guest, had been shamefully treated in her hall.

Penelope was outraged, but wise in how she showed it. She went out to see her suitors for the first time in many days. She went between two maids and with a veil over her face, but still her loveliness was unmistakable; all eyes turned to her, and the beggar-man was left in peace as her suitors began to pay her compliments. These she declined, saying that she knew her grief for her husband had robbed her of her looks; but indeed she did grieve, for she had come to believe that her lord was truly dead. That being so, why did the men in her house not court her in the usual way, with courtesy and with gifts?

At this the men who had been eating her out of house and home vied with each other to give her rich gifts. She accepted all gravely and withdrew without making any promise, or inviting any to follow her into her chambers—any except for the beggar who had been insulted.

Alone with his wife for the first time after twenty years. Odysseus kept his disguise. He answered her gracious words humbly, and he said he had seen Odysseus on his way to Troy—he spoke of him as of a dead man whom he had honored, and Penelope wept. Then she sent a servant to tend him and gave him a bed for the night. He slept uneasily, wondering how he might prevail against such a large number of shameless men; but he tried to reassure himself with the thought of his own good wits, Telemachus' courage, and Athena's help.

In the morning he found that Penelope had helped him as well, unwittingly. She came out before the suitors again and said she had decided how to choose her next husband. Then she set out the bow that had been Odysseus'. Whoever could shoot an arrow from it straight through twelve rings, a feat Odysseus had done easily, would be Odysseus' worthy successor. She withdrew then, leaving Telemachus to watch and report on the shooting.

Odysseus, hearing this, saw his chance. He slipped outside and gave instructions to two old and trusted servants. Then he came in again and watched as suitor after suitor tried and failed to bend his great bow. After the last failure he stepped forward, still apparently old and clearly in rags, and asked a chance to try whether the strength of his youth had left him altogether. The suitors cried out that such a request was an insult, but Telemachus said the matter was his to choose not theirs, and he gave the bow to the old stranger.

The suitors stared in wonder as the beggar bent the bow and shot his shaft straight through the rings. They gaped in horror as he turned the bow on them. They reached for their weapons—which were gone (hidden by the prudent Telemachus); they ran for the doors and found them bolted from the outside by the faithful servants; they pled for their lives, but their pleas fell on deaf ears—except for one singer whom Odysseus chose to spare. Then Odysseus unbarred the door from the maidservants' quarters and told them the place needed cleaning up. Many of the women were glad to see the suitors dead—the men had been arrogant and hot-tempered, and free with their hands in more ways than one—but some grieved. Odysseus asked which of them had had dalliances with the suitors, or joined them in showing disrespect to Penelope, and twelve of the fifty were pronounced guilty by their fellow servants. Odysseus had them hanged; his travels and his sufferings had taught him many things, but seemingly mercy was not one of them.

At last Penelope was called forth, and she stared doubtfully at the man who called himself her husband. But when she had tried him with secret signs and questions, when at last she was sure he was her own long-lost Odysseus, she fell into his arms, weeping and laughing, and

their joy in their reunion was great in proportion to the long griefs they had suffered apart.

Notes:

This narrative is taken from Homer's *Odyssey*.

Chapter 8 – Agamemnon's Homecoming and Orestes' Choice

Agamemnon's way home was shorter and straighter than that of Odysseus. His ship had come near to foundering, but he and all his men escaped drowning, and when the seas calmed they were in familiar waters with a favorable wind. They made straight for Argos, where Agamemnon's people and Agamemnon's queen awaited his return.

Their waiting was uneasy. For ten years they had been a city of women, old men and youths, and their eyes and minds had been turned across the sea, wondering what had happened to their vanished soldiers. Sometimes the people praised Agamemnon for his valor and wished him victory and a speedy return. Sometimes they blamed him for taking their men away to a pointless war over a faithless wife. Sometimes, more quietly, they muttered about Iphigenia, the innocent daughter he had killed to get a favorable wind for his voyage; and they looked darkly at the palace where Iphigenia's mother Clytemnestra sat and brooded and... None of them was foolhardy enough to say aloud what else she might be doing; some things were best not overheard, either by men or gods.

Even when the watchman on the palace roof saw the leaping chain of fires which meant that Troy had fallen and the men of Argos were returning in triumph, the watchers were divided in their minds. Eager, yes, to see the ones they had missed again, and perhaps their lord king as well. And yet... They hoped aloud, and with some doubt, that Agamemnon would have the wisdom not to overreach in his victory and so offend the gods. And once again they looked at the palace and wondered what manner of welcome Clytemnestra had in mind.

She acted quickly to set those doubts at rest by preparing a splendid celebration for her dear lord's return. She ordered sacrifices and thank-offerings, music and flowers, and the preparation of a great feast. She spoke freely to all hearers of her long sorrow for Agamemnon's absence and her heart-deep joy at his return, and nobody contradicted her—at least, not audibly. She did criticize the men she overheard cursing Helen as the cause of the war. Helen, after all, was Clytemnestra's own sister; and hadn't she been led astray by a goddess? And who was so impious as to resist a goddess? Once again, her people had learned during the ten years of her rule not to disagree where she could hear them.

It was perhaps tactless of Agamemnon to arrive at the gates of his palace and present himself to his wife in the same chariot with his enforced concubine Cassandra, but Clytemnestra offered no wifely

reproaches. She met Agamemnon with a passionate and flowery speech of welcome and spread purple cloths for him to tread on, that his feet might not touch the dust. He argued that such an honor befitted gods not men and might be taken as a sign of arrogance on his part, but she said she'd sworn an oath to the gods about how she would welcome her husband home, and did he mean to make her break it? Thus persuaded, he walked on the fine purples up to his own front gates, where she led him inside, urging him to come and bathe and put on fine robes before he sat down to his victory feast. His people watched and murmured as the great gates closed behind him.

A servant was left to chivvy Cassandra into the house—nervously, for the lady was known to be a lunatic or a prophet or something else unchancy, and also to be remarkably free with her tongue. People were still shocked, if not surprised, when she looked at the palace in horror and recalled to the watching crowd the murders and betrayals which had plagued Agamemnon's family for generations, and added that the next episode in that horrid story was about to be enacted—and that she would be one of its victims. Some of the listeners murmured that if she didn't want to be a victim she should speak more carefully. Cassandra said that discretion wouldn't save her; nothing would save her; only let her be remembered, and revenged. Then she went shuddering into the house.

Soon after the great gates swung wide again, and Clytemnestra called to her people to see how she had welcomed her lord home. Agamemnon lay at her feet, wrapped in a rich—and also heavy and confining—silver garment, covered in blood, and quite dead; his wife had stabbed him herself while he was helpless and off his guard. Cassandra, less adorned but equally dead, lay beside him.

The people recoiled in horror, and cried out that she would be banished for such a horrible deed. Clytemnestra told them she didn't think so. In the first place, the power lay in her hands not theirs, and the palace guard was loyal to her. But, more importantly: how dared they hiss at her for a murderer, when they hadn't given the same foul welcome to Agamemnon? Clytemnestra, after all, had killed a guilty man, the murderer of her best-beloved child; while Agamemnon was the murderer of an innocent, of his own innocent daughter. Besides, Agamemnon's line was stained with more murders than his only: the house of Atreus was cursed, root and branch, by the gods: what was she, Clytemnestra, but the instrument of the gods' vengeance?

The people fell back, murmuring doubtfully. They could not condone her flattering and then murdering her husband; but they also remembered Iphigenia, happy and high-hearted, setting out for her wedding, and they remembered the first horror of hearing that she had been slaughtered not married, and by her own father at that...Nor

had they forgotten the curse on the house of Atreus... And yet, and yet...

While they wavered, a man came out to stand at Clytemnestra's side. This was Aegisthus, a kinsman of Agamemnon: his father was Thyestes, who had been tricked into eating the flesh of his own murdered children by Agamemnon's father Atreus. Aegisthus had escaped the slaughter and grown up to brood and to plot. Atreus was dead before Aegisthus had strength to attack him, but there was something fitting about visiting his own vengeance on the guilty man's son. So, while Clytemnestra had done the actual seducing and stabbing, he had made sure that no one interfered with her. Oh, and there was another incentive for him—he was the Queen's lover, and no way inclined to give her up simply because her arrogant husband had come home at last.

The old men who had doubted when Clytemnestra spoke regained their conviction as they listened to Aegisthus. They cursed him for a coward who had stayed home while other men went out to die before Troy, and who had left his vengeance to be carried out by a woman; they threatened him with the curses of the gods, and offered to give him a taste of the gods' vengeance themselves...

Aegisthus called the palace guard out in full armor. It might be unseemly to kill old men, he said, but if they were rebellious it was entirely appropriate to lock them up and not feed them until they saw reason, begged for mercy and swore loyalty—and if they resisted arrest, their blood would be on their own heads.

Clytemnestra stepped between the lines of men and stopped what might have been a slaughter. No, she told Aegisthus, there's no need for that; let the old men grumble, there's no real harm in them, and if we starve a lot of them we'll get a bad reputation. No, let them go home and reflect on the justice of Agamemnon's fate. His cursed line is dead now, and the curse is dead with them, and we two will rule all things well.

Perhaps she believed what she said then, but before long fear overrode any impulse toward gentleness. By her command or her new husband's, Agamemnon's body was hacked and dishonored and given no funeral rites. Then Clytemnestra began to look doubtfully on Agamemnon's surviving children who were both his and hers. Iphigenia was dead by his hand, but two daughters and one young son remained.

Electra, the oldest living girl, saw the fear and calculation in her mother's face, and made some calculations of her own. She urged the old man who tutored Agamemnon's children to take her little brother Orestes safely away into some far country and hide him. The servant

obeyed, and the child was far away before Clytemnestra or Aegisthus sent after him. Finding him gone, they feared that he might be raised by someone who has teaching him the duty of vengeance—and, in any case, there was the danger that when he grew to manhood he would claim his father's inheritance. The rumor ran through the city that Clytemnestra's servants were abroad offering money for word of Orestes' whereabouts, and more money for his dead body. If those rumors were true, the messengers did not succeed.

Clytemnestra, in spite of her own example, seems to have considered daughters less dangerous than sons. Indeed her younger daughter Chrysothemis proved to be quiet and compliant, and willing to all appearances to honor Aegisthus as her father. Electra was another matter. Agamemnon had not received funeral rites, and mourning for him was forbidden, but Electra shaved her head, tore her clothes, and lamented loudly to anyone who would listen—not only during the usual days of mourning, but for year after year. Clytemnestra tried remonstrances, tried commands, tried striking her daughter: nothing had any effect. Finally Aegisthus ordered that Electra should no longer be treated as a princess. She was dressed as a servant and ordered to do menial work. Only in one thing she was still treated with special care: a watch was set over her to make sure that no man courted her or slept with her, lest she should bear a son as an avenger.

If this treatment was meant to break Electra's pride or her resolve, it failed. Aegisthus shut her in the house as much as he could, and when he was home she didn't dare stir outside; but in his absence she contrived to get away and weep at her father's grave. Clytemnestra, meanwhile, celebrated the anniversary of the death of the man who had killed her older daughter—though her devotion to the memory of Iphigenia seems not to have made her any more tender to her next daughter.

But one night, after years of ruling at Aegisthus' side, Clytemnestra had terrible dreams. Some say that she dreamed she gave birth to a serpent, and she lifted it to suckle it, and it struck her breast and drew heart's blood. Others say that she dreamed Agamemnon walked into the palace and thrust his scepter down into the hearth, and it took root and grew until its great branches overshadowed all the land. She woke with cold fear in her heart, and she sent belated offerings to Agamemnon's grave—wine for a libation, and also locks of her own hair. She sent them by the hands of her daughter Chrysothemis, having a healthy fear of visiting the grave herself. And Chrysothemis on her way to the grave met Electra going to her own solitary mourning.

Chrysothemis and Electra were not accustomed to being together; for submissive Chrysothemis was dressed and treated as a princess

(though her suitors were strongly discouraged), while Electra kept to the servants' quarters. Perhaps it is not surprising that as they went to the grave they reproached each other. Chrysothemis told Electra that she was acting like a madwoman, that her open anger and mourning hurt no one but herself and served no one at all. Electra replied angrily that if no one on earth mourned for the murdered, if no one confronted the murderers in spite of their power, then life was meaningless and humankind utterly contemptible. Chrysothemis said that Aegisthus had threatened to lock Electra in a dungeon for the rest of her life if she didn't stop making complaints in public. Let him do that, Electra said. Furthermore, let Chrysothemis not dare to lay Clytemnestra's hair on Agamemnon's grave; her own, and some of Electra's, would be more appropriate.

To that, at least, Chrysothemis agreed. She went on to the grave, and found that someone had been there before her. There was a lock of reddish hair laid on the grave, and the ground was wet with wine. She looked thoughtfully at the hair; very like her own; very like her sister's; but clearly belonging to neither of them... A hope sprang to her mind, and she ran back to share it with her sister.

Clytemnestra, seemingly, had had second thoughts and felt compelled to visit the grave herself; but on her way there she met Electra, and stopped to scold her for wandering abroad when she was supposed to be shut in the house. Soon there were hot words spoken on both sides. Clytemnestra called Electra an unnatural sister, who could honor Iphigenia's killer and wish to see her unavenged; Electra retorted that if kin-murder had to be expunged by blood, Clytemnestra had better look to herself—and in any case her motherly love was far from apparent toward her living children; lust after Aegisthus seemed her more likely, and the less commendable, motive.

A stranger, an old man in travel-stained garments, broke in on the quarrel then, saying he was a Phocian traveler bound to the palace with news of Orestes. What news? Clytemnestra asked why. He answered that Orestes was dead.

Clytemnestra looked strangely on the messenger, and said she did not know whether to grieve for her son or rejoice at her own safety, newly guaranteed. Electra had no such doubts, but cried out bitterly. Clytemnestra muttered about the girl's bad manners and hurried the visitor into the palace to expand on his news.

That was when Chrysothemis reached Electra and began to pour out her hopes, based on the offering she had found at the grave, that Orestes lived. When Electra reported the old stranger's news, Chrysothemis wept, and for a moment the sisters were bound by their grief; but when Electra said that the avenger's task now fell on them together, their brother being dead, Chrysothemis refused any part in

such an attempt. They had no strength for it, she said; all they could do was get themselves killed. Electra was willing to risk that, and told her sister scornfully to go tell Clytemnestra of Electra's threats and so assure Electra's death. Chrysothemis protested that she wasn't trying to get anyone killed, and she ran back to the palace—but not, indeed, to bear tales.

A young stranger came on Electra before she had a chance to calm herself: another Phocian, by his own account, carrying the urn of Orestes' ashes. But when he saw the violence of Electra's grief, and learned who she was, the young man wept and acknowledged that he was actually Orestes, returned with a false report to see how things stood in Argos. Plainly he had not expected to see his sister thin, haggard and dressed like a servant; but the sight hardened his resolve. Though indeed, he told Electra, he had sought the oracle before returning to Argos, asking Apollo what he should do: to leave his father unavenged was a terrible thing; to seek revenge on his mother's husband and his kinsman was somewhat dismaying; and to harm his mother... that was horrible indeed. But Apollo had threatened him with all manner of curses if he didn't avenge his father, so for vengeance he had come. Not to raise a rebellion—he didn't have the money or the men; but since his father had been killed by guile, surely the punishment could be made to fit the crime.

And so it proved. Going into the palace, supposedly to present Orestes' ashes, Orestes was welcomed by Clytemnestra. She sent a messenger to bring Aegisthus back to hear the good news, and then invited the supposed Phocian to come have private speech with her concerning the death of her son. When she understood that her living son had come back, and knew why he had come, she pleaded with him for her life; but he had no more pity on her than she had had on her husband or on Cassandra. Aegisthus' killing, coming after that, was an easy thing. And when Orestes opened the doors and showed the bodies, even as Clytemnestra had done with her victims, the people were ready to commend him as a just avenger.

But it was not only their voices that mattered. Orestes' face darkened and his hands clenched. Speaking slowly and with difficulty, he said that a terrible sound had begun in his mind, and he feared that he would soon dance to the music of madness. While he retained his right mind he wanted it made clear that his actions had been just—that his mother had been a murderer—besides, that Apollo had driven him to act—had threatened him with terrible things if he did not act—But he felt the curse coming on him now, he could not stay after all and rule the kingdom whose tyrants he had killed; he had a long pilgrimage and penitence to undergo, he had to see if Apollo would cleanse him, would free him...

The people urged him to calm himself, assured him that he had acted rightly. But he stared at something none of them could see and gasped aloud about the horrible women with snaky hair and bleeding eyes who were coming to seize him.

They're not real, the crowds cried. Stay here. You were right. You have won!

But Orestes screamed again about the terrible women and fled, his face contorted as though he himself was caught in a death-agony that would not end. The people stared after him and murmured that they did not know whether to call him savior or destroyer.

Notes:

I have taken the story up through the public response to Agamemnon's death from Aeschylus' play *Agamemnon*. Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers/Choephoroe*, Euripides' *Electra* and Sophocles' *Electra* all tell variant versions of the next part of the story. I have used some combination here. Sophocles names Electra as the one who sent Orestes away into hiding, while Aeschylus says Clytemnestra banished him, and Euripides says a servant fled with him on the servant's own initiative. Chrysothemis comes up only on Sophocles' narrative. But Sophocles ends his play on a note of apparent triumph, while both Aeschylus and Euripides end with Orestes guilt-wracked and fleeing—I have followed Aeschylus' account more closely here. The poets also give rather different pictures of public opinion: the three plays are well worth reading and contrasting for this alone. Some accounts show some sympathy for Clytemnestra. Aegisthus seems to be universally unregretted.

Aeschylus and Sophocles agree that Electra was kept as an unmarried servant in Aegisthus' house, but Euripides says Aegisthus forced her into marriage with a peasant; the peasant, however, didn't lay a hand on her, and helped her and Orestes with their scheme of vengeance.

Both Aeschylus and Euripides give variant accounts of the ending of Orestes' story and the resolution of the family curse, as we shall see in the next chapter.

The epigraph to *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* is taken from *The Libation Bearers*, when the people are praying that the gods will help Orestes and Electra take revenge on their mother and stepfather—though I presume Rowling chose the words for themselves, not for their context.

Chapter 9 – The Passing of the Curse

Orestes fled, bloody-handed and mad-minded, to Apollo's temple, with the Furies crying at his heels. Apollo had set him on to kill his mother, he thought, and surely if there was any protection at all from the punishment for that terrible crime, Apollo must offer it.

The Furies (called in Greek the Erinyes), as you may remember from Chapter 1, were born of the bloodshed when the Titan Uranus castrated his father Cronus. Since then they had haunted mortals who shed the blood of their kinfolk. They were inexhaustible, implacable; they had a certain stern sense of justice, and no mercy whatsoever. Their way, as they told Orestes, was to lay hold of the blood-guilty and never let go until the horror of them had sent their victim into a slow wasting sickness. The Furies were blood-drinkers, but they didn't offer a quick and bloody death; they preferred to let their victims grow weak very, very slowly, to afflict their bodies with hunger and pain and their minds with horrible images of the deeds they had done. Death from such causes would come slowly yet surely, but would bring no release; in Hades the wrath of the Furies would still lie on the shedder of blood, leaving him wretched forever.

Orestes was already haggard and hollow-eyed when he collapsed within the doors of Apollo's sanctuary, and the temple's priestess recoiled from him in horror. But his followers also fell senseless there, robbed of their terrible power by the presence of the younger—and maybe, in some moods, more merciful—god who dwelt there. And it was Orestes who woke first, to find Apollo brooding over his sleep. He saw the Furies too, and he shuddered, but they slept, and his mind was free of their madness if not of their fear. He understood the orders Apollo laid on him.

Not for Orestes his mother's dream of avenging the dishonored dead, pronouncing the deed righteous, and forthwith seizing power and ruling all things well. His first instinct had been right—to flee Argos, to exile himself in expiation of his sins. Apollo told him that he would have to flee further, to travel strange lands and seas, to offer sacrifice on other altars and seek cleansing from his guilt. But Apollo would not let the Furies destroy him in mind or body while that pilgrimage lasted. At its end he would come to Athens, and in Athena's shrine he must plead his case and deliver himself to judgment—either to be restored to his home again, his sins forgiven, or to be delivered to the Furies for a slow and miserable death followed by an eternity of wretchedness.

Orestes heard, and he accepted the sentence—asking only that Apollo remember true justice; for, Orestes said, the god's *power* to do good was doubted by none... He did not quite voice his doubts about

Apollo's constant *will* to good, but doubtless the god understood them. Apparently he did not see them as cause for further punishment. He sent Orestes out from his presence with Hermes at his side to guide him and protect him, and only after Orestes was well away did he let Clytemnestra's ghost take shape before the altar and wake the Furies to pursue their prey again.

Pursue they did, tireless and terrible, and Orestes saw them always coming on behind him. But with Hermes at his side they did not quite dare to lay hold of him. He saw their snaky hair and bleeding eyes, he remembered the terrible thing that he had done, he grieved—but he remained able to eat and sleep and remember his purpose, his instructions and his hope. Slowly, as the long months wore away, his horror faded. When a year had passed he showed himself at Athena's temple and submitted himself to her judgment; he said, also, that his hands were clean now, his guilt purged by his pilgrimage and his long sorrow, so that he had the right to speak in the holy temple and to ask for justice.

The Furies, who had been allowed to enter this temple without falling into sleep, answered that there was no such thing as atonement. Orestes could no more be made clean than Clytemnestra could rise from the dead.

Why, Orestes demanded, had they not plagued Clytemnestra when she killed her husband and then spent years enjoying her power and her pleasure? Because he shared no blood tie with her, the Furies said. They were not concerned with large and abstract balances of justice. Their task was to torment kinslayers, and they did that task faithfully, and woe betide anyone who tried to balk them of their prey. In the first place, if their claims were not honored, there would be a natural consequence: children would feel themselves free to kill their parents, and the earth would be covered in bloodshed. (By that logic, Orestes said, if Clytemnestra had been left to enjoy what she stole forever, wouldn't women have felt emboldened to kill their husbands? And what would that have led to?) In the second place, if Athena followed the lead of her fellow young upstart god Apollo and gave a verdict in favor of Orestes, the Furies would punish her by blighting the harvests of Athens which she loved and sending deadly plagues on its people. The Furies might hound the avenger Orestes to death and beyond, but they understood and believed in vengeance quite heartily themselves. Athena listened to all this, called the people of Athens in to judge the matter, and then let the Furies question Orestes.

Orestes admitted freely that he had killed his mother. He reminded his hearers of why he had done it. He said that Apollo had a share in that act, having counseled it—but, unlike Helen or Agamemnon, he didn't say that the fault was all the god's. He owned the facts and put his

cause in the hands of the gods, to be reprieved or destroyed according to what they held to be just.

Apollo intervened at this point with a rather questionable argument. He claimed that fathers were the true parents and mothers merely vessels which received the children, so of course an obligation to the father canceled an obligation to the mother. In proof of this he mentioned that Athena had been born of Zeus with no mother at all .

Athena turned to the Athenians then, asking them to give just judgment. Their votes returned evenly split. Were they divided over the relative rights of mothers and fathers, or the merits of retribution and of mercy, or on whether they feared Apollo or the Furies more? The stories do not tell us that. Athena, then, was left to settle the verdict, and she gave judgment in Orestes' favor.

Orestes bowed in gratitude, and declared perpetual peace between Argos and Athens. The Athenians heard that gladly, but they looked with doubt at the Furies, who threatened doom and destruction. Athena, however, had her own arguments to offer. In the first place, the popular vote had been split, so how could the Furies consider that the Athenians had wronged them and punish them with plagues? Very easily, the Furies said; their honor and power had been nullified, and they intended to avenge that home without worrying about protecting innocents. But there were other forms of honor and of power, Athena urged. They had borne curses and been feared for ages beyond counting. Would they not try being loved and revered? Instead of roaming from bloodshed to bloodshed and fomenting destruction, would they not settle in Athens, in a convenient cave, and bless the land around them instead of cursing, and receive offerings and hymns of praise? And of course if anyone was found guilty on balance, and in the great scheme of things, that one could still be turned over to the Furies for punishment.

Many of the Furies listened to Athena's words. Thereafter they lived in Athens in honor and in peace.

But the Furies, like the gods, were many, and not all of one mind in anything. Orestes, setting out for home with his innocence declared by Athena, still saw dark and terrible figures following him, and sometimes his mind was touched with madness again: he screamed at things no one else could see, he struck out blindly, he fell foaming at the mouth. Taking refuge in another of Apollo's shrines, he asked again if there was any way for him to be truly freed.

Yes, the god answered, but the way was perilous. There was a shrine of Artemis in the barbarian country of the Taurians, and in that shrine an image of the goddess which had fallen there from heaven. If Orestes could take that image away to Argos with him, he would find

himself and the land freed of the curse which had lain on all Tantalus' descendants. The promise was fair, but the danger was great: it was the custom of the Taurians to kill any foreigners who entered their country in front of the very image he was going to seek.

Orestes accepted that journey like the first. He set out for the Taurian land. He did not go alone. With him went his friend Pylades, who had loved him first when he was a child in exile. Some stories say that Pylades went to Argos with Orestes and helped him in his vengeance. Certainly Pylades never shrank from him in his suffering and guilt, or in his danger.

They got close to the shrine by stealth, but then they were discovered. Orestes and Pylades drew their swords and made a furious attempt either to cut their way out or to die in battle, not as sacrifices; but there were great numbers arrayed against them, and the fight looked hopeless even before the Furies seized Orestes again and felled him to the ground, weeping and gasping. Then the Taurians seized both men and put them into an antechamber of the temple, with guards at the door and a distraught young woman inside who said that, much as she hated human sacrifice, it was her task to consecrate them to Artemis and then hand them off to their killers deeper in the temple.

She wept for them, but they refrained from weeping for themselves—also from naming themselves. She asked if they would at least say where they came from. When they answered, Argos, she questioned them eagerly about the fate of that city, and specifically about Agamemnon, Clytemnestra and their children. Orestes and Pylades wondered at her interest, and at her grief for the deaths of the royal couple and the madness and wanderings of Orestes. They wondered more when she said that she thought she could convince the Taurians to let one of them go back to Argos living and carry a message for her, though there was no chance that both of them could be permitted to live. They agreed willingly enough to that. Each offered to stay and die, but Orestes argued that he was the one whose guilt and suffering had brought them into danger in the first place—and, in any case, his life was as much a burden as a joy to him. Pylades yielded to this and took the letter; but when he urged the danger of shipwrecks and accidents, the young priestess agreed to give her message to him verbally as well. The heart of the message was simple enough, she said: Iphigenia sent greetings to her brother Orestes and begged him to take her away from the terrible place where she was held captive.

Iphigenia? Orestes protested. But she was dead; Agamemnon had killed her, and Clytemnestra had killed him for that killing, and Orestes had killed Clytemnestra for that killing...

No, Iphigenia insisted. She wasn't dead. Yes, she had thought she was going to die, she had begged for her life and her father had hardened

his heart against her; but just before the knife touched her throat she had been snatched away, leaving a simulacrum behind to bleed and die, while she herself was dropped among the Taurians, where human sacrifice was not the strange abomination it had been in Argos but an accepted practice. Which was why the message had to be delivered to Orestes...

With that, Pylades stuck the letter into Orestes' hand and explained that that task was done. Iphigenia embraced her brother with joy, and then stood back staring. Plainly she had to find a way to get both men away alive; but if they both escaped while in her keeping, the Taurians would kill her... No, Orestes said. He had enough woman's blood on his hands. He would get Iphigenia out to safety with him, or he would die with her.

Iphigenia had seen quite enough dying, and she hit on a plan. She called in the temple attendants and announced that the men they had given her were guilty of matricide and therefore ritually unclean, not fit to be offered as sacrifices until both they and the holy statue of Artemis which they had defiled were washed in a secluded bay of the sea by her own hands, while she said certain rites of purification. Furthermore, all others should keep far away from the site of the purification, lest they should be tainted by the guilt of the strangers or blasted by the wrath of the goddess who did not like to be spied on by the common herd.

The temple attendants believed her; they tied the strangers up and let her march them out of sight, with the image of Artemis in her arms and the end of the rope that bound the prisoners in one hand. They listened from a distance and heard what seemed to be the chanting of invocations to the goddess. And then they heard silence for a long time. They held back at first, fearing the consequences Iphigenia had threatened, but then it occurred to them that the alien matricides might have managed to free themselves and murder the priestess. Running down to the shore, they found Iphigenia, Orestes and Pylades embarked and trying to put out to sea—but the wind was against them, and the waves drove the boat back to shore, and all three were taken prisoner again. The King himself made his way down toward the shore to see to their fitting punishment.

What he saw instead was Athena, in the full splendor of her divinity, crying to him to spare the three and let them go in freedom. The King obeyed, the wind turned, and the three sailed homeward, free at last of the Furies and the curse.

Notes:

Part III: Oedipus and His Children

Chapter 10 – Oedipus and the Prophecies

Once upon a time there was a young man named Oedipus who believed that he was the only and well-beloved son of his parents, King Polybus and Queen Merope of Corinth. He loved them as they loved him. When a young drunkard taunted him, saying that he was not the true son of King Polybus, he was both furious and hurt. Likely he put the most obvious interpretation on the taunt and thought the drunk was calling Merope an adulteress and Oedipus a bastard. He told the King and Queen what he had heard. They expressed outrage, said it was a lie and told him not to worry. But something in their faces, in their voices, troubled Oedipus. He believed that there was something they weren't telling him.

He didn't press them—perhaps he didn't want to hurt their feelings any further; perhaps he was simply convinced that they wouldn't tell him the truth. Instead he went on a solitary and secret journey to Apollo's oracle at Delphi, and there he asked about his parentage.

As we have seen, the oracle never lied, but it was often cryptic enough to be a dangerous guide of conduct. So it proved for Oedipus. The Oracle did not reassure him that he was Polybus' son, nor did it confirm his suspicions that he was not. Instead it told him that he was doomed to a dreadful fate: He would kill his father, marry his mother, and produce children of incest, children terrible to behold.

The prophecy dismayed Oedipus, and he resolved to escape it at all costs. He left Polybus and Merope, left the kingdom that was to have been his, left everything that he loved, and resolved to live in perpetual exile rather than returning evil to the parents who had given him so much good.

Despite these noble intentions—or maybe because of them—resentment burned in him. When he came to a crossroads not far from Delphi and found a chariot surrounded by attendants coming the other way, he didn't yield the road. The chariot-driver shoved Oedipus, and Oedipus shoved back. Seeing that, the old man who rode in the carriage struck out hard with a goad, catching Oedipus a painful blow on the head. Oedipus was furious and returned the blow with interest; the old man fell sprawling from his seat, clearly dead. At this the driver and the attendants set on Oedipus, and he struck back to keep himself from being killed in revenge for the old man's death. He was angry, and he was young and strong, and maybe the god's hand was on him. He killed them all. He went on his way.

That way took him to the city of Thebes, a proud and long-prosperous city which was then in a state of grief and fear. Their king Laius was newly dead, leaving no son to inherit his kingdom. And worse than that—as it seemed then—they were besieged by a man-eating monster whom no one had been able to kill or drive away. The Sphinx had the face of a woman, the wings of a great bird, and the body and claws of a lion, but she was larger and stronger than any mortal lion. Her voice, like her face, was human or nearly so. This allowed her to play, catlike, with her victims. Rather than killing them at once, she would hold them almost gently in her great paws and promise to let them go if they could answer her riddle. No one had succeeded in guessing the right answer. They may have been somewhat distracted by the bloodstains on her shining fur and the human bones strewn outside the city gates, the remains of others who had tried and failed to answer. The monster had not come within the city gates, but she prowled outside them, swift and silent, so that no one dared to come or go; the city was in danger of starving. Their regent, Creon, the brother of widowed Queen Jocasta, had promised the throne of Thebes to anyone who could rid the city of the Sphinx.

Oedipus undertook that challenge. He had been trained to rule, but had lost the kingdom that should have been his because of his love and fear for his parents, and where else would the chance to rule present itself to a solitary wanderer? And he feared dying less than he feared living to fulfill the terrible prophecy.

He went out to seek the Sphinx, and she found him and crooned her riddle to him as she had too many dead men. Could he tell her, she asked, the name of the animal that went on four legs at morning, on two legs at midday, and on three in the evening?

Oedipus was quick-minded as well as strong—and maybe the god's hand was on him again. He answered that the animal was man, who crawls in infancy, walks in the prime of life, and leans on a staff in old age. That was the right answer to the riddle. The Sphinx's great claws flashed, but this time they were turned, not on Oedipus, but on herself. Oedipus watched until her body lay still in the dust, and then he walked back to tell the people of Thebes that they were saved. They cheered him, they thanked the gods for him, and they rejoiced greatly as they took him for their King. The widowed Queen Jocasta, who was still beautiful though no longer young, welcomed him as her lord and husband. She also proved to be still fertile: she bore him two sons, Polyneices and Eteocles, and two daughters, Antigone and Ismene. The children grew strong and fair, and the city loved their lord, and it seemed to Oedipus that he had overcome his fate by his devotion, courage and skill, turning the curse into a blessing.

But when Polyneices and Eteocles were on the brink of manhood

another terror paralyzed the city, one that could not be destroyed by sword-skill or word-skill. The growing crops in the field were struck with mildew, yielding no food to the farmers. Pregnant women miscarried or gave birth to dead children. Then death began to stalk the living as well: overnight healthy men and women developed high fevers and burned their lives away in incurable pain.

The city mourned. Sacrifices were offered at all the altars of all the gods, and fervent prayers were raised; and the people also sent a delegation to their king and savior to beg that he might save them again.

Oedipus told them that he would do all he could, but the first need was for knowledge, and to that end he had sent his brother-in-law Creon to seek help from Apollo's oracle. While he was still speaking to them Creon returned, and there was light in his eyes and hope in his face. Apollo had told him that the plague on Thebes could indeed be cured and the curse lifted, if only Thebes would purge itself of bloodguilt.

What bloodguilt? Oedipus asked. Why, the guilt of the murder of their old King Laius, which had never been avenged, Creon said.

Oedipus said vehemently that regicide was hateful to all the gods and surely must be punished; furthermore, he added, the man who had killed one king might kill another, and in simple self-preservation he was bound to seek out and punish a king-killer. But why hadn't someone done that long ago? Creon observed that they had been distracted, first by the terror of the Sphinx, and then by joy at their deliverance.

Oedipus summoned all the people to the palace. When they had assembled he called down horrible curses on the murderer of Laius, and on anyone who concealed knowledge of that murderer or gave him shelter or any kind of comfort. Then he asked Creon if Apollo had told them anything about where to look for the murderer. Yes, Creon said: the oracle declared the murderer to be within the city. Oedipus then asked what was known of Laius' death: where had it happened, and how? He was told that Laius died when he was on a journey with only a few attendants, one of whom had escaped the robbers and brought word back to the city.

Oedipus observed that it seemed a cold trail and hard to follow, but there was still hope: as well as dispatching Creon to the oracle, he had sent to the prophet Teiresias, who might be able to tell them where to look.

Teiresias came, a blind old man leaning heavily on his staff. But when he heard Oedipus' voice and Oedipus' question he shuddered and said that he should not have come: what was the good of knowing, when

the knowledge could be of no help? He would say nothing. Oedipus rebuked him for faintheartedness and pointed out that they stood in desperate need of wisdom. Teiresias replied that speaking his wisdom could only do harm both to him and to the one who urged him to answer, so he would go home without further explanations.

Maturity and long years of good fortune had not altogether assuaged Oedipus' fierce temper. He reviled Teiresias as a coward, as a traitor, as a heartless man, and finally said that Teiresias had probably instigated Laius' death himself, though as a blind man he probably wasn't capable of actually striking a deathblow.

Teiresias, old and wise and he was, had a temper of his own. He spat back that it was Oedipus himself who had defiled the land and brought the plague.

This answer pleased Oedipus even less than Teiresias' silence had done. He accused Teiresias of plotting with Creon to overthrow him and give the throne back to Creon, and he threatened vague but dire punishments. He added more mocking words about Teiresias' blindness. Teiresias retorted that Oedipus had eyes but could not see himself or anything else clearly; that the threat to Oedipus and to the kingdom came, not from Creon, but from Oedipus himself; and that soon enough Oedipus himself would be poor and blind.

Oedipus still spoke scornfully, but perhaps doubt touched his heart. He let the old man go home unharmed. But when Creon heard what he was accused of, he lost his temper, began by protesting his innocence and loyalty, and ended by telling Oedipus that he was a fool and no good ruler and that the city was Creon's as well as Oedipus'. These words were not calculated to allay Oedipus' suspicions. The two men were shouting at each other, and some feared that words would pass to blows, when Queen Jocasta hurried out from the palace to see what her husband and her brother were quarreling about.

When she heard that the dispute had arisen from a prophecy, she chided them both for foolishness. Prophecies, she said, were meaningless. Why, her own first husband Laius had heard a prophecy that terrified him, and it had come to nothing. The prophecy said that his own son would kill him. He couldn't bring himself to stay out of her bed even for fear of that, but when their son was born, he took the infant, pierced his ankles and tied them together with a leather cord, and gave him to a shepherd who was instructed to leave him in some wild and desolate place, where the child would die of hunger or cold or be eaten by wild beasts and never return to do his father harm. Plainly it worked; the child naturally was never seen or heard of again, and Laius lived to be old and then got himself killed by strangers at a place where three roads met...

Oedipus started at that, and Jocasta looked at him in puzzlement. A place where three roads met? he asked. Was she sure of that? What place might that be? It was near Delphi, she said. Oedipus' face grew paler. When? he asked. When did it happen? Not long, Jocasta said, before Oedipus arrived to save them from the Sphinx. How did she know where it had happened? he pressed. The servant who survived the attack told her all about it, she said. He was a trustworthy man, though no longer a servant; very early in Oedipus' reign he had begged her permission to leave the city and become a shepherd in a remote area, and she had granted it.

Oedipus, tense and sweating, urged that the man be called promptly, and he told Jocasta—and the listening people—about the old man in the chariot whom he had killed in a dispute over the right of way. She shook her head. No, it couldn't be the same man, she said. The servant said Laius was killed by strangers, plural.

While they waited for the servant's return, another messenger, tired and travel-stained, hurried to the palace and sought audience with the King. He bore urgent news, he said, from Corinth: King Polybus had died, and the widow-queen Merope implored her dear son to come home and to reign.

Oedipus wept for Polybius' death, but he said also that at least he was glad to have escaped the prophecy which said he would destroy his father. Still, while Merope lived there must be some danger of that other shameful prophecy coming true...

What other prophecy? the messenger asked. Oedipus explained. He was offended at first when the messenger laughed. Had Oedipus really exiled himself from home all these years in fear of that? the messenger asked. It had been quite unnecessary, for Oedipus was no blood kin to either Polybius or Merope, being a foundling. The messenger himself had received the child who was later named Oedipus in trust from another servant, and had taken him to the childless royal couple, who pitied him for his abandonment and his injured feet and who vowed to raise him as their own son.

Who was that other servant? Oedipus asked. The messenger described him, and someone in the watching crowd said that sounded like the same man who had brought word of Laius' death.

Jocasta interrupted, telling Oedipus to inquire no further; her words were calm but her looks were wild and her voice unsteady. Oedipus thought she was afraid that he was lowborn and she'd feel shamed by being his consort. He reproached her for her finicky pride. She hissed that he didn't understand anything and she hoped he never would, and she ran into the house.

The messenger, probably meaning to be reassuring, said there was no

need to search for the servant who'd brought him the child—there the man was now, that shepherd who was coming toward them, led by one of the king's own servants. The messenger smiled, but the shepherd looked wary, and when the messenger started to ask him about the foundling child the shepherd shouted at him to be quiet.

Oedipus was angry now with the cold anger of fear. He told the shepherd that he intended to have the whole story. When the shepherd tried to refuse, Oedipus threatened him with torture; when he pleaded his old age, Oedipus called servants to twist his arms behind his back and hold him steady in case more forceful means of persuasion were required.

The shepherd spoke then, bitterly but truthfully, telling Oedipus that he had the child from Jocasta's own hands, saying that he should be left to die rather than living to endanger his father. But the shepherd pitied the child and thought it best to take him far away and put him with kind working people, where he'd have his chance to live but would never bring danger to his father's house. And the kind working person he selected was the messenger who, he had just learned, had brought the child to Polybus and Merope for fostering...

Oedipus stared at the old man in horror, finally understanding. "All things come true," he said hollowly. "I married the woman I should not have married. I killed the man I should not have killed." He ran into the palace then to confront Jocasta, his mother and his wife, with his new knowledge.

He found her dead. She had understood the truth earlier than he, and had hanged herself. He stared bleakly at that sight, and then before the servants could restrain him he blinded himself. When he stumbled back outside his people shuddered at the sight of him. He begged them to take care of his daughters, and for his own part either to kill him or to drive him out of the city; like Orestes, he felt the curse closing in on himself but hoped still to lift it from his native land. But Creon led him back into the palace, still wailing bitterly for his parents and his children and himself.

So it was when Oedipus' grief and guilt were fresh. But as he stayed in the palace where Creon ruled, and the plague abated, Oedipus consoled himself with the thought that none of his actions were really his fault. The god had foretold them all, and doubtless he'd had no chance of escaping his fate; besides, he hadn't understood that the man he was killing was his father, or that the woman he was marrying was his mother... He began to think that he still did deserve room, honor and gratitude in Thebes.

Creon, seeing this, decided that Oedipus was no longer a useful object lesson in showing Oedipus' sons' unfitness to rule; and Creon ordered

that the blind man should be driven out of the city. Oedipus' sons didn't protest, fearing to be banished with him. Oedipus' former subjects might pity him, but none of them were willing to share his exile or his curse. He would have stumbled in strange places, blind and alone, until he starved, if his daughters had not come to his aid. Antigone, the elder, just come to the age when she might be called a woman not a child, left Thebes with him, led him, supported him, begged for him, fed and tended him. Ismene, the younger girl, went to Delphi at her father's bidding to ask Apollo if there was any way for him to find mercy. The god's answer was riddling and strange, but it gave Oedipus some hope. Ismene went back to Thebes, to pray for her father and sister, attend to any new developments that might make their homecoming possible, and send them word of what she heard.

Oedipus and Antigone wandered for a long time, asking for little and generally getting less: some people scorned their poverty and his blindness, and some held that any unfortunate man must be accursed and the curse might infect anyone foolish enough to offer help. But others remembered that Zeus was said to protect suppliants who asked help in his name, and between one thing and another Antigone was able to secure enough food to keep them both alive. Still, after years of wandering no one would have taken her for a nobly born woman of marriageable age, or seen in him the strong hero of Thebes. Their bodies were lean and hard, their clothes rags, their faces haggard.

So matters stood when they approached Athens, which Oedipus began to believe was the place where Apollo had hinted he might find rest at last. Oedipus was exhausted before they reached the city gates; Antigone settled him on a convenient rock by the road and started off to ask if anyone would take in a blind beggar. But before she was out of hearing a passerby called to her father that he was sitting in a dangerous and holy place and ought to get out of there at once. Oedipus had other ideas: if he was on holy ground, he said, he was clearly a suppliant under the protection of the gods of that place...which gods were those, anyway? They were the Eumenides, the stranger told him, the Mercies, though in other places they might have other names. Perhaps Oedipus had heard the tale of Orestes; at any rate it seems he knew something of the Furies, and of the unwisdom of speaking of them by that name. He said that Apollo's oracle had told him to seek those goddesses out and promised he would find protection at their shrine.

The stranger hurried back to the city, bearing news of Oedipus, and the elders of Colonus, the settlement nearest the shrine, came out to meet him. They were firmer than the stranger had been in telling him to remove himself from hallowed ground at once, but they promised him that they would not then drive him away from their gates. So

Oedipus came out and sat in a place that was not god-marked, and the elders asked him politely but firmly to explain who he was and where he had come from. He tried to decline answering, and for cause; when they insisted and he answered, they told him to leave at once and take his curse with him.

Antigone pleaded with them, for her sake and for his, and for the love of the gods. The elders tried to argue that the love of the gods prompted them to drive notorious sinners away, but both Antigone and Oedipus answered firmly that the gods enjoined the protection of suppliants, and told the elders to call on Theseus, the king of Athens under whose sway Colonus came, to judge their case. The elders spoke doubtfully and then agreed to send a messenger to Theseus.

While they waited for him, someone else arrived unlooked-for: Ismene, Antigone's younger sister, travel-stained and on a sweating horse. She wept on seeing them, and said that it had been hard to track them. Why hadn't her brothers helped her? Oedipus asked. Ismene said sadly that they were preoccupied with their own affairs. Polyneices and Eteocles were men not boys now, and each had decided that he had the right and the need to rule Thebes as their father had done. Eteocles was willing to ally himself with Creon; the two of them together had prevailed, and Polyneices had been driven out of the city in disgrace. Polyneices hadn't wasted time in lamenting; going to Argos, he had married the Argive chieftain's daughter and then encouraged the young men of the city to attack Thebes with him at their head, and he had found sympathetic hearing. War was brewing, and Ismene didn't know what course the pity of the gods might take...

What pity? Oedipus asked. Ismene said that Apollo had spoken again, saying that Oedipus in his helpless old age would confer safety, success, and victory in war to those who took him in. This word had not come to Ismene in private; all Thebes knew of it, and she expected a delegation was already on its way to bring him back.

They would take him home? Oedipus asked. They would bury him in his native ground?

Well, no, not that, she said; they meant to keep him somewhere outside the city, as he was still an exile and a man disgraced, but they meant to keep him close enough to keep them safe and bless them if the second oracle proved right... and to ward off the curse which it was said Oedipus' death would bring on Thebes if he died far off in exile.

Oedipus' anger had not burnt out in his long years of wandering. He said he hoped that curse would strike both his sons who had not helped or pitied him in his suffering.

The elders of Colonus had heard Ismene's tale, and they began to look more favorably on their guest. They sent Ismene to make offerings to the Eumenides in atonement for her father's involuntary trespass, while Antigone and Oedipus waited for Theseus.

Theseus came promptly and spoke kindly. He too, he told Oedipus, had been a homeless stranger; and while he was King today, he was still a mortal and knew he could count on the morrow no more than Oedipus; therefore he wished to be kind to other mortal exiles. Oedipus thanked him and asked Theseus to let him stay and rest at Colonus until he died, and to bury him there, and also to stop any Thebans from carrying him off unwillingly. Theseus agreed to all this and set off for Athens to bring a guard of able-bodied men to help with the last part of the request.

But other armed men came before the Athenian guard could return. Creon was at their head. Creon spoke softly, saying how he pitied Oedipus' wretchedness, and Antigone's singleness and vulnerability to predatory men, and promising to take them back with him. Oedipus said Creon had shown no care for his sufferings and dangers when he exiled him, and told Creon all Ismene's message. Being blind, he didn't see some of Creon's guard departing at that word. Oedipus refused flatly to be taken back to, but not into, Thebes. Creon scolded him, and when that failed, told him that he was not really offering Oedipus a choice. Oedipus observed that it was hardly wise to forcibly carry off an old man under heaven's protection. Creon said that would hardly be necessary. His guards had already taken Ismene, and would forthwith take Antigone, and Oedipus could wander without a guide or prop and die alone...or he could come with Creon like a good old beggar.

The elders tried to intervene then, but Creon's men were young and full-armed, and they took Antigone away struggling and crying out for help. But Creon made the mistake of lingering a little way behind them to gloat, which allowed the old men to hinder his going until Theseus returned.

Theseus was furious when he learned of Creon's deeds. Creon tried to explain that he was merely trying to take a wretch and curse-bringer off the hands of the virtuous Athenians, but Theseus was not impressed. He sent his soldiers galloping after Ismene and Antigone, and followed more slowly with Creon and an armed guard, leaving Oedipus and the old men who were his new hosts to worry together.

Theseus and the soldiers returned, bringing the girls with them unharmed, and also bringing a visitor far less welcome to Oedipus: his son Polyneices, the eldest, the exile, whom they had found kneeling as a suppliant in Poseidon's temple, asking in the god's name for an audience with his father. Polyneices, like Creon before him, spoke of

his compassion for his father and sisters, and then spoke feelingly of his own exile and the wrongs he bore. He urged that if only Oedipus would come with him, he would surely take a successful revenge for all their sakes against Creon and the Thebans.

Oedipus turned his head away and would not answer until Polyneices, Antigone and his hosts urged him to give an answer to the son who was begging now as he himself had begged not long ago, and to have pity on a son who might appear unfilial, remembering that Oedipus and his own father.... Thus urged, Oedipus gave an answer worse than silence would have been. Oedipus said bitterly that Polyneices, like Creon, had no sense of justice or mercy but only of self-interest; that he had first abandoned his father, then sought to use him; and Oedipus cursed Polyneices to his face, wishing shameful death on him and Eteocles alike.

Polyneices might have been as selfish as Creon, but he was somewhat less arrogant. He took his father's word as final, and as a sign of his doom. Turning to go, he asked Antigone to see that he was honorably buried after his father's curse killed him. Antigone wept and told him to avoid the need for burial by calling off his war against his own brother and his own people. But Polyneices refused, saying if he did that he'd be called a coward. But if they knew about the curse...Antigone urged. They weren't going to hear about it, Polyneices said, walking away.

As he went the sky darkened and the thunder rolled out overhead. Oedipus felt his death coming on him. He embraced his daughters for the last time and blessed them. Then he asked Theseus to take him away and to bury him in a secret place which the gods would reveal; while his grave was kept secret, he said, the gods' protection would rest on Athens for his sake.

Theseus went with him, and came back grave and wondering. He said that Oedipus, though blind, had led him unerringly to a place that was holy indeed, and had died there, suddenly and painlessly. He was buried in sacred ground, and the city would mourn for his sake. And his daughters, of course, would receive welcome and every care...

Antigone stopped weeping long enough to thank him, and to refuse a resting place. She had work to do, she said; she had to return to Thebes and do what could be done to stop her brothers from killing each other. She went away still weeping, and Ismene followed her. But the elders of Colonus praised the gods who had led Oedipus to them and blessed them for his sake.

Notes:

This story is taken almost entirely from Sophocles' plays *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* . The Sphinx's riddle is mentioned there

but actually specified in other sources—I got it from Hamilton’s *Mythology* .

Chapter 11 — Oedipus' Children

Antigone and Ismene came to Thebes in time to plead with Eteocles that he might make peace with his brother, but they were unable to sway his mind or to stop the war. Soon after their arrival an army came from Argos, with Polyneices at their head, and camped all around the city walls. The watchmen on the walls looked down in fear at the host camped below, and the people inside heard the cries of men and the hoof beats of horses and shuddered. For the walls of their city were strong, but the army brought against them was very great, and the seven captains who led the bands outside each of Thebes' seven gates were proud men who feared little and threatened much. Sentries reported that five of the seven had sworn that they would take the city despite all that either its human defenders or the gods could do. Hearing this, the women of the city mourned, fearing that men who did not fear the gods would be entirely merciless if they sacked the city.

Eteocles shouted at the women to shut up and stop disheartening their men, and he insisted that the boasts of the invaders would turn against them; that the gods would take offense at those rash words and revenge themselves. He chose for the opponents of the boastful captain's men known for their fighting skill, but also for their piety and discretion.

But, the sentries said, his brother Polyneices had made no such impious boast. Polyneices bore the device of Justice in his shield, and he swore that he came as one mistreated and wrongfully driven out from his home and his inheritance, confident that Heaven would restore him his rights and avenge his wrongs.

Eteocles looked strangely at them as they said this, and then he looked beyond them, looked at something terrible they could not see. He spoke distractedly of his father's curse rising again, and of the Furies crying out to him to attack his brother. He swore that he would lead the defenders of the gate Polyneices attacked, and furthermore that he would kill his brother with his own hands.

These words, and his looks, dismayed all the onlookers. The women whom he had been reproaching told him that it was impious as well as unnatural for brother to attack brother. He bade them go home, shut themselves up and remember that they were utterly unfit to give counsel about men's affairs. And as for the gods... Look what the gods had brought on his father Oedipus! Surely the gods desired nothing more than the destruction of mortals. Surely the goddesses whose maddening music filled his mind urged him to fratricide, and maybe to his own death also, and no one was going to stop him...

In the dead of night the Argive army attacked the walls with torches

and scaling ladders, and drove hard at all the gates. Many fell on both sides; one of the slain was Creon's favorite son Menoeceus, who was too young to fight skillfully but too old and too proud to stay safely behind the walls. One of the Argive captains who had boasted that he would take the city in spite of Zeus himself scaled the wall and was about to open the gates from within when Zeus struck him down with a thunderbolt. The rest of the Argive captains were killed by the defenders. Polyneices and Eteocles sought each other out amidst the darkness and fire and the screaming of pain-mad or battle-mad horses and men. They found each other in that chaos, closed with each other, and felled each other dead.

In the first light of dawn the Thebans thanked the gods for saving their city, and they mourned their dead. And Creon, now the undisputed and sole king of Thebes, gave his edict about the dead: Eteocles, who had fallen defending his city, should be given a splendid funeral, and all the dead who fought with him should be interred with great honor. But Polyneices and the invaders should be left outside the walls for the wild birds and the wild dogs to eat. No one was to mourn for them; no one was to bury them; anyone who disobeyed either edict could expect death by stoning.

The people muttered to each other uneasily, but none dared to resist Creon openly. The ones who stood near enough for him to hear them agreed nervously that loyalty to one's own city was a great thing, and they spoke honestly and freely of their grief for Eteocles. Creon, satisfied, set guards over the bodies of the attackers and then went back into his palace.

But one of Creon's subjects was resolved to disobey his edict: Antigone, who had loved both her brothers dearly, and who remembered Polyneices pleading with her for honorable burial as he walked away, shattered, from their father's curse. She told her sister Ismene that she meant to bury their brother, for her love for him and also for love of the gods who enjoined honorable burial for all the dead, and she asked if Ismene would help.

That was madness, Ismene said. She loved Polyneices too, but two women had no chance of getting his body away from a group of men with swords and burying it, even apart from the fact that if they did that and anyone caught them they would be stoned to death... They were women, weak women, and had to yield to force; surely the gods must understand that.

Antigone looked at her sister with contempt. Keep yourself safe, then, she said; leave the danger and the work to me; I fear the gods more than I fear men—and I love the dead more than I love the living, for nearly all those I love have died.

Ismene begged her to yield, saying the attempt was hopeless; but when she saw her sister unwilling to listen, she promised at least that she would keep her secret .

The next morning Creon received a visit from a very frightened guardsman who said that he brought bad news but it wasn't his fault, really it wasn't, he hadn't done it and he couldn't have known about it and...

Spit the news out, Creon said, and stop making excuses. The man obliged. He said that he'd been with the men standing guard over Polyneices' body, and they'd watched while there was light, and if anyone had brought a cart they'd have heard it in the dark, surely, but there hadn't been a cart because they hadn't heard anything and anyway there were no wheel-ruts---Catching sight of Creon's impatient face, he hurried his tale ahead. The first light of day, he said, had revealed a thick layer of dust spread over Polyneices' body. Whoever did that had lacked time or strength to dig a hole, but for ritual purposes the man was, he supposed, buried, and the dogs didn't seem to have been at him...

Creon flew into a rage, accused the man of having allowed the burial to go ahead in exchange for a bribe, and sent the man back to unbury the corpse and figure out who had broken the commandment, unless he wanted to be killed himself—yes, and tortured before being stoned, to show him the unwisdom of taking bribes....

The man fled, vowing (under his breath) to get away promptly to someplace where Creon couldn't find him. But early in the afternoon he was back again, breathing easier and holding a woman by the elbow. Holding Antigone. There was no doubt about it, he said, she'd buried him. He had uncovered the corpse as instructed, but then a dust storm had blown up so he had to hunker down and shut his eyes; still, he could hear a woman wailing; and when the dust settled Polyneices' body was covered with dust again (more than the storm should have accounted for) and Antigone was pouring out drink-offerings for his soul.

Antigone owned the deed and said she didn't fear the punishment. When Creon reproached her with breaking the law, she said she kept the unchangeable laws of the gods, not the changeable edicts of Creon. He told her that good men and evil men should not be treated equally, and she asked how any mortal could be sure of how the gods saw good and evil. He told her that her first duty was to hate her country's enemies, and she said it was not her nature to join in hating, but only in loving. Well then, he said, she was fit for no better company than that of the dead, and she could love them if she wished to; he was not going to let a woman flout his authority. In his presence the crowds murmured to Antigone that she was too proud.

She ignored them. She did answer Creon when he said that her sister must have helped her; she insisted on Ismene's innocence.

Creon was not convinced. That morning Ismene had been heard to mutter strange things, and weep, and start at shadows—she seemed to be mad, and surely that was a sign of secret guilt. When Ismene was led out she said that she should be found guilty as her sister; but Antigone, who was unmistakably sane, insisted that it wasn't so, that Ismene had done nothing for which she could be condemned, and in this at least Antigone prevailed.

Before Creon's sentence could be carried out his surviving son, Haemon, hurried into his presence. Haemon had been engaged to be married to Antigone. Creon explained to him that he was being saved from marriage to a disloyal and wicked woman, and that he should let himself be ruled by his father's wisdom, not by his own lusts. Haemon spoke very humbly, praising his father's wisdom, but suggesting that in this particular case his father was mistaken. In Creon's presence, Haemon said, the people condemned Antigone's pride, but in his absence they praised her courage and condemned Creon's impious treatment of the dead.

Creon flashed into anger then, telling Haemon that he was a stupid boy who wanted to subject the State to the will of foolish commoners rather than trusting rightly in the will of the King. Haemon said that a policy of solitary rule without consultation of the people's wishes might suit the solitary ruler of a desert, but it ill befitted a ruler of men. When Creon announced that his sentence would be carried out immediately, and Haemon would watch and learn what was good, Haemon ran away weeping.

Creon's soldiers took Antigone out into a wild place and walled her into a cave to die either quickly, by her own hand, or slowly, of hunger. The people watched her go and lamented for the curse on her house. Before they had time to disperse, or Creon to go after his son, another messenger arrived in the square: the prophet Teiresias, tired and distressed. He said that the gods would not accept the usual sacrifices, and the birds who usually brought him word of the gods' will were wild now, bearing no tidings, but attacking each other and screaming with voices almost human. He knew why, he said: they had eaten the flesh of unburied dead men, and that cursed food had turned them mad; and the gods, hating the desecration of the dead and the punishment of the living who succored the dead, had turned their backs on the city.

Creon, like Oedipus before him, scorned the prophet and accused him of taking bribes. Teiresias said that when Creon's dear son lay dead as a result of Creon's deeds, and when the children of the unburied dead raised another and greater army against Thebes, Creon would see that

his words had been true. Then he turned and walked away.

Creon perhaps remembered Teiresias walking away from Oedipus; or perhaps he thought again of Haemon's distress. In any case, he asked the elders of the city for their advice, disregarding his earlier rebuke to Haemon. The elders were quick and decisive in giving that advice: bury Polyneices, free Antigone. This time Creon listened.

Creon and his soldiers reverently burned what was left of Polyneices' body and buried the ashes with the proper ceremonies. Then they went to the cave where the guards had imprisoned Antigone. They found some of the stones pushed away from the entrance and wondered if she were free already. But when they came to the opening they found Antigone dead, having hanged herself, and Haemon standing by her body and weeping. When he saw his father Haemon drew his sword and rushed at him; Creon recoiled, the soldiers moved to seize Haemon, and Haemon sprang back and turned his sword on himself. When word of this came back to Haemon's mother she spoke bitter words against her husband Creon, and she killed herself.

Creon came back to his people with his son's body in his arms. He had done wrong, he told them, he knew he had done wrong, and the fault was his, not that of the women or the gods or... He shook his head; there was no more to say. His servants led him weeping into his palace.

But even this terrible reverse did not wholly soften his heart. The Argive dead were left unburied. Their mothers sent word to Creon and asked for the right to bury them, and he refused. They then went to Theseus at Athens and begged him to right the wrong and bring the bodies home. At first he refused, saying that the attack against Thebes had been wicked and foolish and those who took part in it had brought punishment on themselves. But Theseus' mother spoke up, asking him to reconsider. The attackers might have deserved death for their folly, but they didn't deserve to be left unburied; the city-states of Greece differed on many points, but all understood the laws of the gods which protected the helpless, and who was more helpless than the dead? Besides, she said, she was old like the women who had come to plead with Theseus, and she loved her son as they had loved theirs...

Theseus said that only a fool would refuse to listen to women, and only an ingrate would refuse to listen to his mother. He agreed to put the matter to a vote of the citizens, and to speak in favor of intervening. The people agreed with him. First, and Theseus sent to Creon. First he asked courteously, for the return of the bodies. Then he made it clear that refusal would mean war. Creon said that he didn't fear the men of a mob-ruled city.

In this he was unwise; for the Athenian attack was successful, and they scattered the Theban army and forced open the gates of the city. The women, the children and the old fled to the temples of the gods, but doubted whether any sanctuary would protect them from the victors...

But Theseus stopped his army at the city gates. They had come for the dead, he said, and they would take the dead away, and that was all they would take. The gods had favored them while they fought for a righteous cause, and they weren't going to offend the gods by going on to mistreat the innocents of Thebes.

The remains of the common soldiers of Argos who had died in the battle were buried with honor and due sacrifices not far from the battlefield. Theseus himself helped to lay them out for burial. The remains of the leaders he brought back to Athens—though he took care to burn them before their grieving mothers could see them, and to give the women only discreet urns full of ashes to weep over and to bury. But the wife of one man heard of his plan and leaped into the fire to join her husband in Hades.

The Athenians mourned with the Argive women then, and sent them home with their funeral urns—and also with a promise from the leader of Argos that, out of gratitude, he and his successors would never attack Athens. And the people of Thebes marveled at being spared. But the marvel did not last forever. When the children of the men who had been left for the dogs outside the walls of Thebes grew to manhood they marched against the city seeking revenge, and they razed Thebes to the ground.

Notes:

This section is drawn from three plays by three different authors with rather different perspectives. Aeschylus' play *The Seven Against Thebes* recounts the battle in which Polyneices and Eteocles killed each other; that play ends with Creon's edict about the dead and Antigone's insistence on mourning for Polyneices. Sophocles' play *Antigone* begins with Creon's edict and Antigone's defiance and ends with the deaths of Haemon and his mother and the repentance of Creon. Euripides' play *Suppliants* describes the journey of the Argive mothers to Athens and the recovery of the dead. Aeschylus and Euripides have rather different accounts of the character of the Argives. Sophocles and Euripides speak similarly of the gods' protection of the helpless and the dead, and the three plays all seem to have a similar subtext about listening to women; Aeschylus has Eteocles scorning women's advice on his way out to kill and be killed by his brother, Sophocles has Creon express similar views about Antigone and women in general before he brings his family down in ruin, and Euripides has Theseus listening to his mother and praising women's wisdom before going out

to battle with the gods' favor.

All the playwrights also leave open the question of who the gods really are and how people should respond to them. Do the gods drive humans to do evil, leaving us helpless against our fates? Do they teach us to behave justly and mercifully, leave us free to obey or disobey and then reward or punish us? Do they see or care at all? The characters in the plays draw rather different conclusions, and the readers of the plays may do the same.

A note on chronology: Scholar Edith Hamilton says that the fall of Thebes happened before the Trojan War, and the fact that Teiresias is alive when Oedipus and Creon consult him and is summoned from the dead by Odysseus would seem to bear this out. On the other hand, (at least some of) the Erinyes, the Furies, become the Mercies, the Eumenides, at the end of Orestes' story, and it is in the sacred grove of the Eumenides that aged Oedipus finds shelter. Perhaps the stories of the gods don't fit in normal human time.

Part IV: Lighter Tales

Not all the Greek myths take the form of high tragedy. Here are a few tales of a different sort.

Some of these stories are taken from Roman, not Greek, authors, and in those tales I have used the Latin forms of the names of the deities. The Appendix offers an alphabetical list of Latin names linked to their Greek equivalents.

Chapter 12 — Cupid and Psyche

Once upon a time there was a King who had three daughters. All three of the girls were lovely, delights to their parents and to all who saw them; but the youngest girl, Psyche, surpassed her older sisters in beauty as much as they surpassed all other women. People looked at the older girls with admiration, or pleasure, or love; they complimented them, and the noblest and most handsome of the men hoped to marry them. People looked at Psyche with wide wonder and fell at her feet. And all through her father's kingdom, and far into the lands beyond, the rumor spread that Venus (she whom the Greeks called Aphrodite), the gorgeous Goddess of Love herself, had taken mortal form; or else that a new wonder, a being even lovelier than Venus, had been born into the world. From far and wide people came to adore Psyche. The temples of Venus were neglected as the pilgrims went instead to marvel at the mortal girl.

Venus was furious at this neglect. Paris, she said, had known how to value her beauty rightly, but latter-day mortals were blind impious fools with no sense either of beauty or of reverence. Venus turned her back on the land that had slighted her and went back to the sea whence she had come to nurse her grievance among the water-nymphs. But before she went she called her son Cupid, that mischievous brat who runs about the world inflaming the passions of mortals so that they forgot marriage-vows and divine laws and prudence and everything else but the burning longing he engenders; and she told him to fitly punish Psyche for receiving homage to which she was not entitled. Be a good boy, she told him, and do what your mother tells you: go shoot her with one of your arrows of desire and make her fall in love with the vilest creature you can find. So saying, she went seaward.

In the meantime, Psyche was not happy with her lot. Her sisters married kings, but while multitudes worshipped her, no one offered marriage to her; her beauty seemed to frighten them as much as it attracted them. And while many other women, and Venus herself, envied Psyche, Psyche wished that she could be a plain-looking girl with no throng of worshippers, but with a husband to love and children to raise. Eventually her father the King began to see her point of view, and he consulted the oracle of Apollo to ask where Psyche could find herself a husband.

The god's answer was terrible. No mortal man would love or marry Psyche, he said; quite another bridegroom was marked out for her: a great winged serpent, a fire-breather who ruled a land of pain and darkness, a beast feared by the gods themselves, one who would one day destroy the world. The oracle instructed the King and Queen to

dress Psyche in mourning clothes, lead her to a high place in the wild hill-country, and leave her there alone to be devoured by her bridegroom.

The royal couple wept, but they did not think of defying the god's orders. Psyche looked at them with strange eyes and told them it was late for weeping. They should have wept while all men praised her, while the envy of the gods grew strong; now-now, what was there to do but get through with her horrible wedding as soon as might be? The waiting left her sick at heart, and she wanted it to be done with.

So she put on her black robes, and her family and her people took her out into the wilderness lamenting, and they left her there to meet her fate. Psyche wept, but she did not call out for them, did not ask for help or pity. She had always been alone. She raised her lovely head to the skies, waiting for the dragon.

What came instead was a warm sweet-scented wind that lifted her up gently, flapping her dress like a kite, and carried her into a deep valley full of flowers. She waited there, wondering, and at last she fell asleep.

She woke refreshed, and still alone, and she set herself to explore the new land where the wind had left her. There was a beautiful wood where the light and wind played in the leaves of the great trees; and in the heart of the wood there was a palace that shone like a star. Within and without all was beautiful; and the strangest thing was that the doors stood wide open and unguarded. Psyche entered, marveling, and a chorus of voices greeted her as their queen and mistress; but, look as she might, she could not see the speakers. But when they told her where to find a bath, and a bed, and also the dining-room, their instructions were accurate; and when she sat down to eat, the food that appeared on the table before her was plentiful and delicious, and the harp music that danced around her was surpassingly beautiful.

That night a man came to her bed. She heard the gentle sound of his voice, she felt his touch that made her blood sing in her veins, but there was no light; she could not see him at all. After lovemaking she slept, and when she woke she was alone again.

Several days and nights passed in this way, and then her husband told her in the dark that her family still wept for her, and her sisters had resolved to go to the place where she was left as a sacrifice, to see if they found her body or any sign of her. He urged her not to look at them, not to show herself to them, not to answer them. Psyche wept for the grief of her family, and she said she must speak with her sisters. Her husband said that if she did that he would sorrow greatly and she would be utterly destroyed.

Psyche stayed inside the house the next day, but she wept as bitterly

as her sisters, and when her husband came in the darkness he found her weeping still. He told her to meet her sisters if she must, but to know that no good would come of it.

In the morning the sisters searched the ground where Psyche had been abandoned, and they cried and wailed so the stones almost wept with them. But Psyche called to the wind, which wafted her sisters down to the valley. She showed them her new home and all her treasures, and she told them that her husband was as kind as he was rich and as beautiful as he was kind (for it shamed her to say she had not seen him)—and then, fearing to get tangled in the lie, she gave them gifts of gold and jewels and she called the wind to take her sisters away again.

The sisters had grieved when they thought Psyche was horribly dead, but seeing her so happy made them bitterly jealous. For they told each other that their own marriages had turned out to be disappointing: their husbands were old, their duties were many...and Psyche, Psyche who was always loveliest and luckiest, had everything her heart desired. Well, they might be able to find a way put an end to that.

Psyche was happy that night, but her husband was not. He told her over and over again that she must not let her sisters persuade her to try to see him, for if she tried to do that all would be lost. If she would only let things go on as they were, her child would be divine; but if she tried to look at him, the child would be a mortal, and mother and child would have great sorrow and pain. Given that, she really should avoid seeing her sisters again.

Psyche said her sisters had been glad to see her, and she them, and she wouldn't shun them now, but of course she'd never try to see her husband, if it mattered so much to him.

When her sisters returned they congratulated her on her pregnancy and praised her beauty and her home, and Psyche wished her husband was there to hear how agreeable they were. When they wondered aloud what the child would look like, and asked for details of his father's appearance, Psyche inadvertently contradicted the description she'd given before.

Her sisters looked very grave then, and said that they knew she wasn't telling them the truth; and, indeed, they had come back to warn her that she had good reason to be ashamed of her husband. For they had heard from many inhabitants of the country round that the lord of that fine palace was no man, but a horrible dragon just like the one described in the oracle, almost too loathsome for mortal eyes to bear; and they had heard on good authority that he had taken a wife, and gotten her with child, and meant to devour both mother and child as soon as the baby was born. So they told Psyche that if she cared for

her child, let alone her own life, and if she had any spirit and courage, she would smuggle a lamp and a razor into the bedchamber, look on her husband as he slept, and kill him before he could kill her .

Psyche wept and doubted, but she thought again of her husband's extreme secretiveness, and of the prophecy, and she hid the lamp in the bedchamber, and a razor blade as well. And after their lovemaking she lit the lamp, picked up the razor and steeled herself to face the dragon.

Instead she saw Cupid, the god of love, more beautiful than anything she had ever imagined, lying in her bed. She thought of killing herself in shame at her suspicion, but the razor fell from her hand. She picked up one of her husband's arrows instead and wounded herself with it, and felt the pain and the delight of love burning hotter than ever in her veins. She leaned in to look at her husband more closely—and the lamp spilled hot oil onto his shoulder.

Cupid awoke in pain, and saw himself mistrusted and disobeyed. He reproached Psyche with bitter words, saying that he, a god, had humbled himself, and wounded himself with his own arrow, for her sake, and she had betrayed him. (He didn't seem to think he owed her any explanations, or any apology for the story about the dragon which had so terrified her.) Psyche tried to explain, but he would not listen; he said he would fitly punish her sisters, and maybe the loss of him would be punishment enough for her. He took flight then, leaving his wife weeping and calling after him.

Psyche tried to drown herself in the river, but the waves cast her back on shore, and the god Faunus who loves wild things and open spaces told her not to despair. If she sought her husband long and wholeheartedly, Pan said, Cupid might forgive her. So Psyche set herself to wander through the world looking for him.

She came to the cities where her sisters ruled and told them who her husband had been. Her sisters, more jealous then ever, traveled back to the rock where Psyche had been left and leaped from the cliff, expecting that the wind would carry them to the palace and the god would see them there and love them more than he loved Psyche; but the wind never came, and they died on the stones at the cliff's foot.

The gulls heard the story, and took it out to Venus where she hid in the sea. She knew well where to find her son. She didn't sympathize with his heartache or his burned shoulder; she told him that was what came of disobeying his mother and running around with mortal sluts, and she threatened to cut off his golden hair and break his bright wings. The other gods talked her out of this excess of wrath against her son, and she contented herself with shutting him up in a windowless room to think over his foolishness. They did not talk her

out of seeking revenge on Psyche. Indeed Mercury, the messenger of the gods, was sent throughout the mortal lands to describe Psyche and offer a reward to anyone who would bring her before Venus to be punished.

Psyche, pregnant and grieving, wandering unprotected in the bitter winter, heard the proclamation and sought protection. First she wants to the temple of Ceres, the goddess who was then mourning for her daughter Proserpina who spent the winter unwillingly with her captor-husband Pluto (see chapter 2). Psyche appealed to Ceres' sorrow, described her own and asked for protection. Ceres spoke pityingly to her but said she could not act against Venus' will. Next Psyche tried the temple of Juno, who protected pregnant women, but Juno gave her the same answer. At last, between despair and courage, Psyche walked of her own accord into Venus' temple, gave herself up and asked for word of Cupid.

She got many words from Venus, hard and bitter words, and hard blows as well from Venus' servants Custom, Sorrow and Sadness. When she was ragged and bleeding, Venus laughed at her and said she plainly couldn't win a husband by beauty, so she'd have to try hard work, both to win her husband's favor and to keep Venus from killing her. Venus then began to give Psyche what should have been impossible tasks. First she mixed together a great quantity of tiny seeds, flung them down on the floor and told Psyche to sort them before Venus returned from banqueting. Psyche saw plainly that she couldn't accomplish that; she sat quietly, awaiting her fate. But the ants saw her and pitied her, and they sorted the seed, so that when Venus returned she found the task done.

Then Venus sent Psyche to gather golden fleece from a flock of fierce rams. Seeing their eagerness in attacking each other, and their great size and strength, Psyche thought of drowning herself, but a reed in the river told her to wait until the flock grew weary and went to rest, and then to gather tatters of their wool from the brambles. This she did. Next Venus sent her to dip water from the Styx, from the dragon-guarded river where the gods themselves fear to venture; but an eagle took pity on her and filled her pitcher.

Venus grew angrier with each success, and at last she told Psyche to go to the land of the dead and bring back from Proserpina, the queen of the shades, a box of her beauty, enough to last for one day. At this Psyche thought of suicide again, knowing no other way to reach the land of the dead, and fearing what Venus would do to her if she failed in her task. But stones of the tower she climbed spoke to her and told her how she might enter and pass through the dead land living.

Psyche listened carefully and did all as the stones had taught her. She took two coins in her mouth, and two pieces of bread soaked in honey

in her hands, and she walked through the dark cave-mouth that led into the realm of Hades. Wide-eyed and wary she walked down, down through the dark, until the very thought of the mass of earth and stone above her was a terror. She kept her hands at her sides, one clenched around each sop of bread, not reaching out to any of the strange shapes who loomed out of the darkness and bade her help them. When she came to the black river she opened her mouth to give the ferryman Charon his fee to take her across—but she hid one coin under her tongue. Being set down on the bank in the heart of the dead land, she found a huge dog with three heads, all its mouths slavering, all its teeth shining, looming over her and growling; but she threw a sop to him, and he munched contentedly and let her pass into the dark but splendid palace of Pluto and Proserpina, the rulers of the shades.

Proserpina welcomed her guest courteously, offering her a royal seat and fine foods; but Psyche declined politely, knelt at the dark Queen's feet and asked only for what Venus had told her to ask for. This was granted, and Psyche hurried back past the dog (who let her pass again on receiving the rest of her bread), across the black water (with the fee paid by her other coin), and up into the living light again.

So far she had done all things well. But in the giddiness of her relief she remembered Venus taunting her with her ugliness, and she wondered if some shadow of horror lay on her face from her dark journey in the world below. Surely, if she took just a little of the beauty from that box, it would restore her and Venus wouldn't miss it...

But on opening the box Psyche fell into a sleep like death.

She woke to find her husband, who had snuck out of the house while his mother was distracted, bending over her, wiping away the deathlike sleep from her face and scolding her for endangering herself. He told her to go to his mother, while he went to the rest of the gods to appeal for mercy.

Psyche went and delivered her box to Venus, while Cupid stood before Jupiter and pled his case. Jupiter found in his favor—perhaps moved by pity, but also by policy, as he reminded Cupid that he had better take care after this to be especially helpful next time Jupiter found himself besotted with a mortal. Then he called the gods together, and Venus with them. Jupiter left his own love-affairs out of the public hearing; he argued that since Cupid brought the gods into ill repute through his wantonness, it was fitting for him to marry and settle down.

Venus was not minded to dispute with Jupiter. She agreed to accept Psyche as her daughter-in-law. So Psyche ascended to Olympus and drank the nectar of immortality, and there was a great feast to

celebrate her marriage to Cupid; even Venus danced at the wedding. And soon after Psyche was delivered of her son, whom men call Pleasure.

Notes:

This story is taken from the fourth, fifth and sixth books of *The Golden Ass* by the Roman writer Lucius Apuleius.

Chapter 13 — Short Tales

Lysistrata

Once upon a time Athens and Sparta were at war again. The reasons... well, the Athenians and Spartans gave different accounts of the reasons, of course; and within Athens itself there were also varying opinions. Some people—mostly men—said they were fighting to uphold the liberty, virtue and valor of Athens the god-blessed against tyrannical and god-cursed Sparta. Other people—mostly women-- said that the soldiers were just testosterone-poisoned men in a bad temper looking for a fight. And some of the women said the real motivation was money: the city leaders were supposed to give an account of whatever monies they took from the treasury deposited in Athena's temple, but wartime offered plenty of excuses for flexible spending; if some of the money stuck in the leaders' treasure chests, who was going to take pains to figure that out while there was a war on?

A fair number of Athenian women expressed these opinions, and were told not to bother their pretty little heads about matters which they couldn't possibly be expected to understand. On the occasions when their husbands were home between tours of duty they told them this; when their husbands were away, the old men and the administrators who were left behind in the city kept the male line up. But one woman, Lysistrata, pining for her husband and also greatly annoyed by the insult to her intelligence, devised a plan to remedy both problems once and for all. She sent messages to the women of Sparta, and also to women in the smaller cities allied with both Sparta and Athens, urging them to come and get redress for their wrongs. However much the Athenians and Spartans might feel wronged by each other, the women of both cities were willing to own they felt wronged by their men, and to consider joint action to change that.

The meeting began unpropitiously, with much sneering about the different costumes and customs of the different cities, but when Lysistrata set out the basic problem the women of both sides roared agreement. Yes, they were tired of spending nights alone, with both their lovers and their husbands off strutting in front of their army buddies. Yes, they were tired of having their good advice ignored. Yes, they'd walk through fire to put an end to it.

They didn't have to walk through fire, Lysistrata said. All they had to do was give up sex for as long as it took to bring the men to heel. When their husbands came home, the women needed simply to make themselves as beautiful and tempting as possible, and then flatly refuse sex .

What if they drag us off? a woman asked. Lie there and look bored

and unimpressed, Lysistrata suggested. They won't like that. But we're already tired of having not enough sex, and you're suggesting we give it up completely? another woman pleaded. Not for long, Lysistrata answered. You're pathetic, but the men are even weaker and more self-indulgent. They'll come around. But what about the men who are in this for the money? What if they want money more than sex?

We've dealt with that, Lysistrata said. A group of Athenian women went into Athena's temple first thing this morning and locked the doors from the inside. No one's getting near the treasury without our approval—that is, without making peace. Come to think of it; we can shut ourselves in there; that's an even better way of giving our husbands no satisfaction...

This plan was carried out. When the old men of the city came with brushwood and torches and threatened to smoke the young women out, the old women of the city came with jars of water, doused the firepots and their bearers, and scared away the small force of magistrates and policemen who came to take them away. When the young men of the city came back and pleaded with their wives to come out, the wives leaned out from windows looking their very best, spoke sweetly to them—and refused to touch them until the war was over.

Within five days the women in the temple were becoming cross and tired of their principled stand, but Lysistrata concocted oracles to keep them content. Within a week the men of Athens and the men of Sparta, driven to distraction by unsatisfied lust, made a treaty of peace and swore to keep it forever. Their wives came out to them then, and there was a great deal of lovemaking and merrymaking—but one can imagine that after that the men were reluctant to tell their wives not to meddle in matters of state, knowing the whole thing could happen again.

The Midas Touch

Midas was the King of Phrygia, a pleasant and prosperous kingdom in his day, and one rich in flowers. One day the king's servants went out into his gardens and found a fat old drunk snoring in the midst of the roses and stinking of wine. He didn't have permission to be in the royal gardens, but he was rather obviously not a threat, so the servants tied him up with flower-garlands instead of ropes, hauled him in and dumped him in front of the king, snickering all the while.

King Midas recognized the man: no simple drunken mortal, but Silenus, tutor of the wine-god Bacchus and father of the satyrs. Midas had his servants hurriedly untie Silenus; by the time Silenus was sober enough to know what happened around him, he was being treated as

an honored guest not a prisoner. After ten days of feasting Silenus, Midas delivered him to Bacchus, who had begun to miss the old fool. Bacchus, well pleased, told Midas to name any gift he wished for. And Midas, not much wiser than Silenus, asked eagerly that whatever he touched with his hands should turn to bright gold .

You're sure? Bacchus asked quizzically. Quite sure, Midas answered. Bacchus smiled sidelong and told Midas that his wish was granted. Midas turned and reached out to touch a branch of the holm-oak above him. Immediately it became a branch of gold, beautiful to behold and also very valuable. Midas went home rejoicing, and arrived laden with golden twigs, stones and fruits. He ran his hands idly down the doorposts and beamed to see them glisten into gold. He added some pleasant golden touches to his dining hall, and then sat down to eat...

It was only then that he realized his mistake. Naturally all the delicacies he tried to lift to his mouth turned to gold at his touch, becoming simultaneously valuable and inedible. And his touch on his drinking cup not only turned the cup to gold, but turned the wine inside to gold as well.

Midas thought back on Bacchus' strange expression, and thought of all the stories he'd heard about how the gods hated mortal pride and greed. He cursed himself for a fool, and then desperately he lifted his hands to heaven, begging Bacchus to forgive him for his sinful wish.

Bacchus seems to have been more amused than offended by Midas' choice. He sent the king to wash himself in the River Pactolus. The rushing water washed the curse-gift away. Midas cupped the clear water in his hands and drank, and then went home, a slightly wiser and much happier man.

Philemon and Baucis

Baucis and her husband Philemon lived in a prosperous town, but they were poor, as they had always been, and old, as they had grown together. They lived in a shabby little thatched cottage on the outskirts of town. Their wealthy neighbors looked down on them, but they loved each other, and they were generous to other poor folk.

Once two travel-stained men of undistinguished appearance, one young and the other old, limped into that town after nightfall asking for food and shelter. They knocked on the doors of the fine houses one by one, and one by one they were driven off by watchdogs or doormen who knew their noble masters didn't want to be bothered with scruffy strangers at that time of night. Last of all the strangers knocked at the door of Philemon and Baucis' cottage. A quavering voice called out words of welcome, and the door opened wide to receive them. Philemon improvised a couch for the guests with thatch

and reeds and spread the couple's best blanket (which had only a few little holes in the corner) over it; then he brought turnips from the garden and fetched down a piece of smoked meat hanging from the rafter. Baucis stirred the fire up (tearing out a bit of the thatch to get it going faster), made soup, cooked eggs in the hot ashes, fetched out their best dishes (which, nevertheless, were somewhat chipped) and set out the things they'd saved as treats for the next feast day—olives, dried fruit, a bit of honeycomb. The table wobbled, but Philemon leveled it by shoving a broken dish under the short leg. He also brought out wine, the best they had, though their neighbors would have thought it unfit to give their servants.

The supper preparations were slow, because the old couple were tired and shaky, but they smiled at their guests and made pleasant conversation as they worked, and when the meals was served they tried to make sure their guests had enough and were at ease. Then they began to look uneasy themselves, realizing that their cups of wine were refilling themselves, and that the wine seemed to be of a much better quality than they had expected. Who were these guests? The old couple looked fearfully at each other, and apologetically at their visitors, and begged pardon for offering such poor food. They could do better, they said, if their estimable guests would wait; they had a goose who could be roasted...

But the goose was much younger than the couple, both in absolute and in relative terms, and they chased her around and around the cottage unsuccessfully. At last she fled and hid herself between the visitors, who smiled and told their hosts to sit down, rest themselves, and let the goose live. The guests needed no more food; they were gods. The old man revealed himself as Jupiter, and the young man as his son Mercury. They had come to give the inhospitable town its just deserts, they said, but clearly Philemon and Baucis deserved something better. They urged the old couple to climb the slope behind the house with them.

Philemon and Baucis labored up the slope rather behind their guests. When they looked down on the sleeping town they saw no town at all, but only a wide water where the gulls wheeled and cried. And their own cottage—They looked sadly, expecting to see it swallowed by the water. Then they stared in wonder. The cottage was gone indeed, but in its place stood a temple with columns of marble and roofs of gold.

They turned back to look at their guests. Jupiter smiled on them and told them to ask for whatever their hearts desired most as recompense for their kindness. The old couple asked for a little time to talk that offer over, and the gods granted this. At last Philemon returned their answer, asking that they might serve together in the temple, and that when their time came they might die at the same moment so that

neither of them would have to mourn the other.

These boons were granted. The story of the lake and of the temple spread far and wide, and Philemon and Baucis welcomed pilgrims as generously as they once had welcomed the gods—and with better means of provision.

One day when they were far gone in years Philemon and Baucis stood together in the sun in the temple courtyard, reminiscing about the vanished town and the vanished cottage and their marvelous guests. Baucis looked up from a reverie and stared at her husband, seeing green branches thrusting out from his shoulders. Hearing the catch in her breath, Philemon looked at her and also stared in wonder, murmuring about her bright leaves. They had time to smile at each other one more time, and to say a quiet farewell, before their mouths faded into bark.

The pilgrims coming out from the temple saw no sign of the human guardians who had welcomed them; instead an oak tree and a linden tree stood close together as though they were embracing. The pilgrims hung their boughs with garlands then, and worshipped and praised the faithful ones who had for so long praised and worshipped the gods

.

Notes:

The tale of Philemon and Baucis comes from the eighth book of the Latin poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The story of Midas comes from the eleventh book.

Lysistrata's story comes from the Greek comic playwright Aristophanes. I realize it may be straining a point to call this mythology, but it is a common cultural reference, and I wanted to show that it wasn't always the case that the Greek stories were tragic.

Index: Latin Names of the Greek Pantheon

The Greek names of the pantheon, and a description of each deity, can be found in Chapter 2. This list gives the Roman name of each deity first, in bold, and in alphabetical order, followed by the Greek name. I've included some deities who don't appear in this book under their Latin names; if you look up the primary sources for some of these stories, the names of the other gods may come in handy.

Apollo is Apollo both in Latin and in Greek tales.

Bacchus —Dionysus

Ceres —Demeter

Cupid —Eros

Diana —Artemis

Faunus --Pan

Juno —Hera

Jupiter —Zeus

Mars —Ares

Mercury —Hermes

Minerva —Athena

Neptune —Poseidon

Pluto --Hades

Proserpina —Persephone

Venus —Aphrodite

Vesta —Hestia

Vulcan —Hephaestus

Conclusion: For Further Reading...

There are many easily accessible primary sources for Greek mythology. I've listed a few of the most widely read authors below. If you try one source and find you don't enjoy it, don't give up. The authors have very different styles and perspectives. The translation you get can also make a considerable difference.

The stories in this book are mostly taken from tales by the following authors:

Homer , author of the *Iliad* (the story of the Trojan War) and the *Odyssey* (the story of Odysseus' journey home), was one of the first Greek authors. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are both very long epic poems. You can get them in rhymed, metric or prose translations—check out samples online or at your library and see what style suits you.

Aeschylus , born in the mid-500s BC, was an Athenian and the first of the great Greek tragic playwrights. Some of his best-known plays include *Prometheus Bound* and the plays listed above as part of the Agamemnon cycle.

Sophocles , another Athenian tragedian, was born around 500 BC. His Oedipus plays are probably his best-known work but he also told many other stories.

Euripides , who lived near Athens during the 400s BC, was a particularly prolific author of tragedies. I've drawn on his tellings of Iphigenia and Orestes' story, and of the fall of Troy.

Aristophanes , an Athenian writing in the 400s and 300s BC, is the best-known Greek comic playwright. Some of his comedies, turning on satire of well-known literary and political figures of his day, are hard to fully understand unless you're familiar with the people he was laughing at; others, like *Lysistrata* , translate quite readily.

Ovid , a Roman poet writing in the first century BC in Latin, authored the *Metamorphoses* from which I have taken the stories of Midas, Philemon and Baucis.

Apulueius , who lived in what is now Algeria and was then called Numidia in the first century AD, wrote philosophy and fiction in Latin. His *Metamorphoses* or *The Golden Ass* , from which the story of Cupid and Psyche is taken, has been called the first picaresque novel .

Edith Hamilton's book *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* , which is available free online, tells many more of the Greek myths than this book covers, though her tellings are more compact; she also provides an excellent introduction to various Greek and Latin authors.

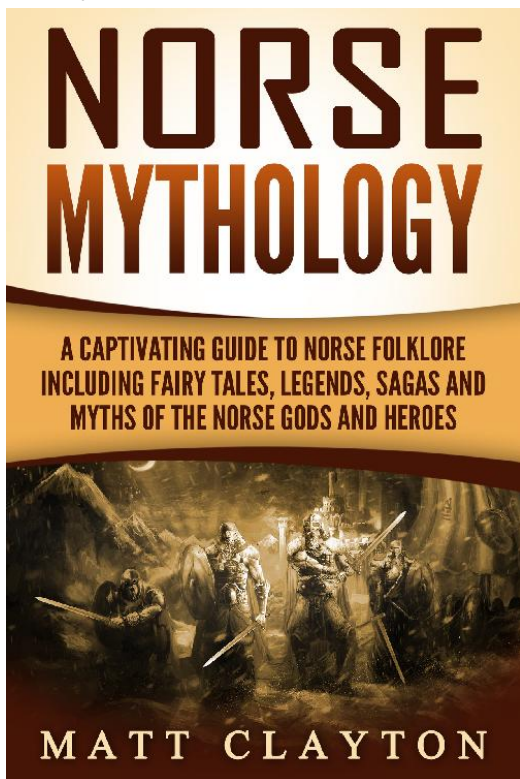
If you enjoyed this individual book on Greek mythology, then I'd really appreciate it if you would post a short review for it on Amazon.

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Section 2: Norse Mythology

*A Captivating Guide to Norse Folklore
Including Fairy Tales, Legends, Sagas
and Myths of the Norse Gods and Heroes*



Introduction

Before Christianity reached what we now call Europe, the Germanic people of that region—people whom we now call Vikings-- had their own sacred stories and practices. Scholars say they didn't share one carefully threshed-out canon of agreed sacred texts; rather, the stories passed from teller to teller, and were different in different regions and different times. The gods celebrated in those stories were also many, varied, and often at variance. Sometimes their deeds and words were high and solemn, full of noble self-sacrifice; sometimes they were mischievous or short-sighted. In this, perhaps, they were like the people who listened to the stories, who laughed and wept and remembered.

The stories linger in our culture today. Four days of our week are named after members of the Norse pantheon (Tyr, Woden (Odin), Thor and Frigg). Wagner's Ring Cycle has kept one version of one of the great Norse stories alive in the minds of music lovers. Readers of modern fantasy will find many echoes of the Norse tales as well. Neil Gaiman, Douglas Adams and others have explicitly taken some of the Norse gods and put them into a modern setting with strange, sad and humorous results. Echoes of Norse tales and creatures abound in the speculative fiction of Ursula Le Guin, J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Tad Williams and others. Something in these old and puzzling stories still has the power to move and unsettle us, and to inspire new acts of creation.

This book will give you a brief introduction to some of the best-known myths found in the primary sources. Suggestions for further reading are offered in the conclusion. There's a glossary of names in the back in case you need help keeping track of a rather large cast of characters. Enjoy your explorations!

Chapter 1 – The Creation of the Worlds

The world began, as it would end, in fire. From the primordial chaos which held neither day nor night, sea nor land, life nor death, a spark arose. The flame, feeding on its own hunger, raged and spread and became the bright hot world of Muspelheim, a living furnace which poured rivers of fire and blasts of hot air into the surrounding void.

Once heat and light existed, their opposites also came into being. Across the universe from Muspelheim another world took shape: Niflheim, icebound, dark and deadly cold. From Niflheim a venomous chilling wind poured into the void, and a slow river of grinding ice.

Ice and fire met in the emptiness. There were terrible explosions, and the void was filled with flying sparks and shards of shattered ice, with fountains of water and jets of steam. That collision birthed the frost-giant Ymir. He was strong and cold and deadly as the breath of Niflheim, but he had the fire-spark of life in him. Ymir sweated as the sparks flew around him, and from the sweat-drops new giants came to life.

Ymir and his brood were not the only ones born of the ice-melt. The cow Audhumbla also took shape between fire and ice, and Ymir and his children drank her milk. She also was thirsty, and she quenched her thirst by licking the ice. Something new began to emerge under the strokes of her tongue: first what looked like a man's hair emerged, and then a head, and then the whole figure stepped free of the ice and looked about him. His name was Buri, and he was the first of the gods. Buri was as beautiful as he was strong, and he wanted others of his own kind. He made his own son, Borr. Borr loved the giantess Bestla, and she bore sons, of whom the greatest was Odin.

Odin and his brothers fought Ymir. The war was remembered long after the reasons were forgotten. Maybe the giant didn't approve of his offspring marrying gods instead of one another. Maybe both Odin and Ymir wanted to claim the whole world for their own people. Be that as it may, they fought, and Odin and his brothers won. Ymir fell dead in the void between the world of fire and the world of ice, and Ymir's blood rose in a great flood and drowned the other frost-giants—all but the giant Bergelmir and his wife. While the others fought, Bergelmir had built a great ship, and as the flood rose he and his wife went into their ship and rode the blood-tide to a safe place beyond the reach of the young gods.

Odin and his brothers turned from fighting to building. They took Ymir's body and reshaped it into a world, a flat ring set midway between the worlds of ice and fire, in a place of flowing water and mild air. Ymir's icy blood became the world's lakes and seas, his flesh and bones the land and the mountains. His skull was set up above the

world, becoming the arch of the sky. The gods took fire from the sparks of Muspelheim and threw them into the air beneath that arch to give light to the world. On the outer margins of that world, beside the endless sea that marked its boundary, was a wasteland inhabited by Bergelmir's children and their children, the giants who remembered Ymir's death and waited for their chance to avenge it. But in the middle of the world the gods raised a defensive wall, built from Ymir's eyebrows, to keep the giants at bay. This defended land was called Midgard, the world of men.

Here, after chaos and war, there was rest and order and the beginning of another kind of life. The sun warmed the earth. Green plants sprang up and grew. Odin and his brothers took two trees, shaped them in the image of the gods, breathed life into their flesh and inspiration into their souls. Ask was the first man, and Embla the first woman, and from those two came all the people of the world.

The gods also took the maggots that gnawed Ymir's flesh, gave them a humanlike form and breathed wisdom into them. These became the race of dwarves, who shared the world with humans, not always happily... As we shall see in other tales.

Notes to the Creation Story:

Like most of the Norse myths, the creation story exists in several forms. It's told in fragments scattered through several of the ancient texts called the Poetic Eddas (most notably in "Voluspa" and "Hovamol,") and in one coherent chunk by twelfth-century statesman and writer Snorri Sturluson in *Gylfaginning*, the first half of the Prose Edda. Snorri drew on the Poetic Eddas, and on some other sources that are lost to us now. He also made some puzzling attempts to harmonize the Norse myths with Christianity, and with Greek mythology; I've left some of those features out. If you're interested in reading the originals, English translations of all the Eddas are available free online.

But the details may vary, the Norse myths agree that the world was born in chaos, and was from its beginning made up of warring opposites: heat and cold, ice and fire, giants and gods. The world was made by the gods from the body of their enemy. Odin himself, the leader of the gods against the giants, was the son of a giantess. There was glory and courage and beauty in the world of the Norse myths, but there was not very much peace.

Chapter 2 – The Building of Asgard

After shaping Midgard for mortals, the gods made a splendid city for themselves and named it Asgard. It was bound to the earth by the fiery bridge called Bifrost, the rainbow; the gods hoped that the giants would be unable to cross this bridge and attack them. Living humans could not pass that way either. But warriors who died bravely in battle were taken up by the Valkyries, the fierce and beautiful daughters of Odin, to Asgard. Half of them went to Odin's castle called Valhalla, where they spent their days in fighting each other (not in hostility, but for practice and for the joy of battle; every evening the injured were restored to perfect health) and their nights in feasting. The other half went to Folkvangr, the great hall of Odin's wife Frigg. Frigg was the wisest of the goddesses. She watched over, and had the power to alter the magical weaving which determined the fates of mortals. Sometimes, unlike her husband, she took brave women as well as brave men into her hall.

All the buildings of Asgard were made of gold. Splendor was everywhere. So were endless life and unwithering strength, thanks to the goddess Iduna's apple tree whose fruit made the eater immortal. And in one place there was something rarer than splendor or immortality—peace. That was in Breiddablik, the Peace Stead, the palace of Balder. Balder was so beautiful that he shed light where he walked, and his judgments were so wise and just that his quarrelsome fellow gods did not find fault with them.

In the midst of all this beauty Odin was uneasy. He remembered the anger of the giants, and he feared that they would destroy everything he and his brothers and sisters had created. The warriors in Valhalla fought each other daily so that they would be a formidable force whenever the day of reckoning came, but he didn't trust that army to save him from the forces the giants could raise. He often went to his other castle Valaskjalf, whose topmost tower was so high that he could see any place in the Worlds from it; he sat alone there, looking, pondering, worrying.

But the first threat to Asgard came, not from the giants, but from another race of gods, the Vanir. Nobody remembers now where the Vanir came from; perhaps they were descended from Buri or Borr's other children. Be that as it may, the Aesir (Asgard's inhabitants) and the Vanir saw each other's power from afar off, felt threatened, and attacked each other. The fighting was long and equally matched; the Vanir threw down the walls of Asgard, but they could not drive the Aesir out. Finally, weary of war and each impressed by the courage and strength of the others, they decided to make a treaty of peace. The Vanir withdrew to their own lands. Two of the Aesir went with them

as hostages or ambassadors, and they soon passed out of the stories of the North. Three of the Vanir remained as hostages in Asgard: Njord, god of the sea and sailors, his son Frey, and his daughter Freya. Now Freya was a wise-woman, skilled in seeing the future, and she had a set of falcon feathers which allowed the wearer to take bird-shape and fly. She was also devastatingly beautiful and free with her favors to any god who struck her fancy.

The Aesir were very pleased with their hostages but less pleased with their ruined walls. Then a stranger arrived at the gates of Asgard, offering to build a better defensive wall that could withstand any assault, and promising to have the work done within a year and a half. The offer seemed good to Odin—until he heard the price. The builder demanded in payment the sun, the moon, and marriage to Freya, who was quite unwilling to be married off. The rest of the gods and goddesses didn't want to see their city stripped of light and loveliness. But Odin feared an attack that would destroy that beauty forever.

After a long argument, the gods decided to accept the builder's offer, and his price, with one condition: that the builder work alone, that the wall be completed within one winter, and that the builder agrees to go unpaid if the work wasn't finished on time. Surely, they thought, the builder couldn't work so fast—but in pride and foolishness, he might overestimate his own capabilities, and so give them most of a wall free of charge. The gods rejoiced when the builder accepted the offer, and they willingly accepted his own condition—that his stallion Svadilfari should be allowed to help him haul stone for the wall. They swore all the oaths he asked of them, pledging to give him his price if he succeeded, and pledging that no god would hurt him while he worked on the wall. (This last promise was needed because of Odin's son Thor, the strongest and shortest-tempered of the gods. No one and nothing could stand against the terrible blows of Thor's thunder-hammer Mjöllnir, and Thor's power had not taught him anything about self-restraint. But even to Thor, an oath was an oath and could not be broken.)

But what a horse Svadilfari was! His speed, his strength, the stones he could move! He worked tirelessly, day and night, and three days before winter's end the building was done except for the gate. The wall was so high and strong that the gods couldn't pretend to be dissatisfied, and the work had gone so quickly that the gods never doubted it would be finished in time. They came together to debate the only question that remained: Which of them had had the terrible idea of accepting the builder's offer? They blamed the usual suspect in such cases: Loki.

Now Loki, the son of a giant, was perhaps the cleverest of the gods, though certainly not the wisest; he was full of ingenious ideas, and

seldom took thought for their long-term consequences. He didn't deny that he'd made the suggestion, which had seemed brilliant to everyone else at the time. When they seized him and threatened him with torture and death if his suggestion led to their losing Freya and the light, he was terrified and swore to them that he would make sure the builder didn't complete the work. They let him go, trusting his oath to hold him, and also knowing that without his help they could see no way out of the bad bargain.

That night the builder went into the forest with his stallion to haul stone. He gloated in his heart, thinking of Freya, and also thinking of the rage and humiliation of the gods. He didn't notice the first time the mare whinnied in the depths of the wood. He didn't catch her scent on the wind. But Svadilfari did. He neighed, tossed his head, tore the lead from his master's hands and galloped into the darkness, chasing the mare who fled before him swiftly and silent as a shadow. The builder gave chase, shouting and cursing, but the horses left him far behind.

The builder, for all his strength and skill, couldn't carry the stone by himself. On the last day of winter, the gods pointed out that his work was unfinished, and he'd have to take himself off without pay. His fury was so fierce that it shattered his disguise, and he stood before them in his own form—a frost-giant, eager to harm the gods who had destroyed Ymir. Thor, seeing that, pulled out the thunder-hammer and struck the builder a blow that shattered him.

So the wall was built, and the gods kept Freya and the sun and moon. But the story of how the gods had cheated the giant spread far and wide, and it only deepened the hatred of the other frost-giants and their determination to take revenge. While the rest of the gods feasted and celebrated, Odin brooded about how and when that revenge would come.

But Loki, eleven months later, took a mare's shape again and gave birth to a fine strong foal, Svadilfari's son. The foal was a marvel, eight-legged and wonderfully strong and fast, and Odin rode him on his longest journeys.

Notes :

The tale of the war between the Aesir and the Vanir is told very briefly by Snorri Sturluson in the *Yngling Saga* and also, with some differences in detail, in *Skáldskaparmál*. For the building and the fortification of Asgard, I've mostly followed Snorri's tale in the *Gylfaginning* (see Notes to Chapter 1.). However, Snorri said that Asgard was the same city as Troy of the Greeks. Most commentators seem to think that was a later addition, and otherwise, the Greek and Norse stories don't seem to blend very well, so I've left that claim out.

Many of the Norse gods are shape-changers, appearing in god-form, or as mortal men and women, or as birds (often with the help of Freya's, or sometimes Frigg's, flight-feathers) or other animals. Loki the trickster, however, takes on an unusual number of shapes even for a Norse god, and this is the only story I know of which features a sex change as well as a species change.

I've used 'gods' here, as elsewhere in this book, to mean both male and female deities.

The physical layout and location of Asgard are rather puzzling. Snorri says, in the same tale, that Asgard is connected to the other worlds only by the rainbow bridge to prevent invasion; that it is Troy, and therefore a city in Midgard; and that it needed walls to keep giants at bay. The Poetic Eddas also offer baffling and apparently contradictory glimpses into where and what Asgard is. Perhaps that is fitting—mortals are not able and are not intended, to fully understand the ways and workings of the gods.

Chapter 3 – Why Odin Has One Eye and Tyr Has One Hand

The Well of Wisdom

Odin was not content to watch and wait and worry about the attack of the giants. He went to great lengths to gain the wisdom that would help him to prevent the destruction of Asgard and Midgard. Later, when he had grown wise enough to know that they would be destroyed in spite of all his efforts, he still struggled to learn enough to delay that destruction as long as he possibly could.

The search for wisdom took him beyond the temporarily safe walls of Asgard. Asgard and all the worlds there are grown on Yggdrasil, the World Ash Tree. At the base of Yggdrasil, there is a deep well. The drinking of its water gives wisdom, and perhaps strange powers as well. The stories have come only confusedly to those of us who have never left the safety of Midgard and drunk of that water.

Some stories say that three women sit between the pool and the tree. These women are named the Norns, and they are immortal (with no need for Iduna's apples) and also wise beyond the dreams of the gods. Every day and every night they carve runic signs into the trunk of Yggdrasil, and as its sap runs through those carvings the fate of all the worlds is changed. The Norns have the shaping and the understanding of fate, but they do not answer the questions of gods or men.

Odin knew better than to question them, but he also knew how much he needed the knowledge of what the runes meant. He left his glorious palace in Asgard and clung to a branch of the World Ash Tree. Odin knew only one way to be found worthy of wisdom, and that was to undergo suffering willingly. So he pierced himself with his own spear and hung head-down from Yggdrasil, chilled and shaken by the wind that blows between the worlds, for nine days and nights. He neither ate nor drank nor accepted help from anyone. At the end of those days, the runes rose clear in his mind; he understood what he had come to understand—and he fell screaming from the tree.

On another occasion, Odin was not content with what he had learned from looking at the images in the water. He craved a drink from the Well of Wisdom itself. But he could not get that without the permission of its guardian Mimir. No one knows now whether Mimir was giant or god or something altogether different, but it is remembered that he was as wise and terrible as the Norns. Mimir was no more minded to answer questions than the Norns were, and since he regularly drank from the Well of Wisdom Odin could not hope to trick him. So he came openly, telling Mimir of his terrible need for understanding. Mimir told him that he was welcome to drink—if he was as willing to pay the price. What price might that be? Odin asked.

Why, only Odin's right eye, Mimir responded.

Odin paid the price. He came back to Asgard bleeding, sadder and wiser; and when he sat on the high seat in Valaskjalf and gazed across the worlds, he saw with only one eye.

The Binding of Fenrir

Loki the trickster was a danger to his fellow gods in more ways than one. When he wasn't coming up with clever and dangerous ideas he was fathering alarming children on the giantess Angrboda. One of these children was Hel, the cruel and cold-hearted goddess. The gods banished her to a chilly corner of the underworld, where she ruled over the dead not lucky enough to be chosen for Asgard; her great hall was called Sleet-Cold, the beds she offered her unwilling guests were called Disease, and her tables were spread with famine. Another of Loki's children was the huge and ferocious serpent Jormungandt, who is also called the Midgard Serpent. Seeing how quickly he grew, and how hungry he was, the gods threw him into the great sea. He kept growing there, and at last circled the world and swallowed his own tail in his terrible hunger. But Odin heard a prophecy that at the world's end the Midgard Serpent would spit his tail out and rise instead to devour the gods.

Last but not least of Loki and Angrboda's children was the great wolf named Fenrir. When he was small the gods smiled at his fierceness, and they raised him and fed him. But as he grew larger, stronger and angrier only the god Tyr, who was as brave as Thor but endowed with more patience and self-control, dared to go close enough to feed him. Then the gods learned that Fenrir also was prophesied to turn against them in the end. So brought a massive chain to Fenrir and asked him to let them bind him and see if he could get free; it would, they said, be a test of strength. Fenrir agreed and broke the chain easily. The gods were alarmed. They forged a stronger and larger chain which they doubted any living thing could break. Fenrir was a little afraid when he looked at it, but he wanted to show his strength, so he agreed to be bound. Once again he fought free, and his pride and delight were a terror to behold.

The gods had done all they could, but they knew that the dwarves were the most cunning of all folk in smithcraft. So they sent to the dwarves to ask for a chain which could not be broken. The dwarves complied with their request. The thing they made was not a massive chain like those the gods had forged. It looked like nothing more than a silken ribbon. But instead of silk, it was made from the sound of a cat's steps, the beard of a woman, the roots of a rock, the sinews of a bear, the breath of a fish, and the spit of a bird. The gods looked doubtfully at this slim ribbon, but they tugged at it with all their might and none of them could break it. When they brought it to Fenrir

they assured him that he could break it easily, and they hoped desperately that they were wrong .

Fenrir, however, was beginning to be crafty as well as strong. He said that if he broke such a lightweight thing, it would give him no glory—but if there was some trick, if the lightweight thing was made of magic and not of silk, then his strength could hardly save him, and he wasn't going to let them bind him. The gods assured him that if he couldn't break such a thin thing as that they'd have no reason to fear him and they'd let him go. That, Fenrir observed, was easy to say while he was free, and once he was bound he couldn't be revenged if they had deceived him. Their reassurances failed to convince him. Still, he was a bit ashamed at being thought afraid, and he agreed that he would let them tie him up if one of the gods would leave his hand in Fenrir's mouth until Fenrir was free again.

At this the gods looked uneasily at each other, and most were unwilling to risk themselves. But Tyr stepped forward and put his right hand into Fenrir's mouth, and then the great wolf allowed the gods to bind him.

The ribbon felt light and soft going on, but as the Wolf fought to be free it grew ever harder, and Fenrir's struggles only bound him faster. The gods laughed to see his struggles, and to know that they were safe from him. But Tyr did not laugh as the wolf's jaws closed over his wrist.

The gods could have killed Fenrir then, helpless as he was, but this they were unwilling to do. They had raised Fenrir, he had been a guest among them, and the murder of a guest was a sure way to bring ill fate. Not that leaving him alive seemed to promise safety in the long run either, for the prophecies said that at the world's end Fenrir would break free and kill Odin himself. But Odin preferred to run that risk rather than incur the curse that must fall on a breaker of hospitality.

Still, guest or not, they never dared to lose him. They fastened his chain to a great deep-rooted rock. There he sits while the world endures, and his howling makes the land for miles around him shudder, and the foaming of his mouth makes a great river, and he and the gods wait, they in far and he in rage and longing, for the end of the world to come. But until the end comes the gods are safe from him—all but Tyr, who has only his left hand now.

Notes:

The tales of Mimir's Well and of the finding of the runes come from fragments in the Poetic Eddas, from the *Voluspa* and the *Hovamol* . Because the tales are so fragmentary, many things are unexplained. The tale of Fenrir's binding comes wholly from Snorri's *Gylfaginning*.

I've grouped them here because they are both tales of the gods willingly undergoing suffering in order to preserve the world. Tyr's lost hand bought a time of respite for the gods, and while Odin loved wisdom for its own sake (and we shall see more of that in the next chapter, as well as a less self-sacrificing aspect of his character) in the end all his knowledge and wisdom were bent on putting off the evil day, letting Asgard and Midgard thrive in beauty and in order as long as possible before the great destruction of Ragnarok.

The danger of killing or mistreating guests in the world of the Norse myths is illustrated in the next chapter and will come up again later in this book.

Chapter 4 – The Mead of Poetry

When the Aesir and the Vanir grew weary of their war and made a treaty of peace, they sealed it with the exchange of hostages, as described in chapter 2. But they also felt the need for another sign of peace in which they all took part. Each god, male and female, on both sides of the war, spat into a jar. Then they thought that this sign of peace was too precious a thing to discard, and they made it into a man named Kvase. Now Kvase had some share in the gifts of every god whose spit had formed him so that his wisdom was amazing. No one ever managed to ask Kvase a question that he could not answer, and he traveled far and wide, answering questions for gods and men and other beings.

Many of the questioners who came to him were grateful for his gifts and honored him. But some had evil intentions—and Kvase, for all his wisdom, didn't know enough to mistrust them or protect himself. When he reached the home of two dwarves who urged him to step inside so that they could speak with him in secret, he accepted their request willingly. But as soon as the door closed on him they killed him and collected his blood, thinking in this way to keep all his wisdom for themselves alone. For a time they succeeded. They brewed mead from a mixture of honey and Kvase's blood, and anyone who drank that mead became a bard and a sage. When the gods came to ask what had happened to their much-loved Kvase, the dwarves said he had choked on his excessive wisdom, since no one had managed to question him wisely or widely enough to draw off the excess. The gods accepted this story and left the dwarves to enjoy their ill-gotten gains.

Later, though, the greed of the dwarves was their undoing. They murdered two other guests, giants who came to them in trust and friendship; but the son of those giants, whose name was Suttung, heard of what they had done, seized them, and would have killed them if they had not offered him the mead of poetry in exchange for their lives. Suttung accepted the exchange; he took the mead and, being more honest than the dwarves were, let them live—though one hopes that he warned other travelers against seeking shelter in their house. He hid the mead in a cave in the rock, and he set his fierce daughter Gunlad to guard it day and night.

Odin heard that the giants had control of a gift of wondrous wisdom, and he resolved to get it away from them. From Mimir and the Norns he had to buy wisdom openly and at the cost of his own pain, but he knew the giants would not willingly give him anything, nor would he weaken himself before them. So he went about getting what he wanted by treachery .

Odin disguised himself as a man, a wanderer, gave himself the name

of Bolverk, and traveled to the country where Suttung lived. There he found nine men, servants of Suttung's brother Bauge, out scything a field and complaining of how dull their blades were. He brought out a whetstone, offered to sharpen the blades properly, and straightway made them sharper than any blade has the need or right to be. The workmen, impressed, asked if they could buy the stone. He said he would sell it and demanded a high price. Each man swore that he would pay and asked Bolverk to sell the stone to him only, not to his fellow workers. So Bolverk threw the stone into the air, and the nine men scrambled to catch it so desperately that they killed each other with their newly sharpened scythes.

Bolverk went on to Bauge's house and found Bauge vexed by the loss of his workmen at the height of the busy season when there was no other help to be had. Bolverk offered to do the work of nine men through the growing season if Bauge would pay him in winter with a drink of Suttung's mead. Bauge said he had no control over Suttung or the mead, but he'd at least ask for a drink on his workman's behalf. Bolverk agreed to those terms, and day in and day out he did the work of nine. When harvest was in and winter come, Bolverk and Bauge went to Suttung, who flatly refused to give them anything. Bauge may have been embarrassed, or angry, or simply afraid that his exceptional workman would demand some other form of payment. At any rate, when Bolverk asked Bauge to help him get at the mead without Suttung's permission Bauge agreed. Bolverk brought out a drill and asked Bauge to bore through the rock to where the mead was, if the drill was sharp enough. Bauge bored and announced that he'd reached the cavern. But when Bolverk blew into the bore-hole chips of stone blew back into his face and he realized the hole still ended in solid stone. He demanded that Bauge keep drilling, and Bauge complied.

The next time Bauge withdrew the drill and Bolverk blew into the hole, the chips flew inward. Then Bolverk changed himself into the shape of a snake and slithered away into the hole. Perhaps Bauge realized by this change that his workman was more than he seemed. Perhaps he'd never truly meant to make the payment. In any case, he tried to kill the snake with the rock-drill, but the snake was too quick for him; it had already dropped safely to the floor of the cavern where the precious mead was kept.

Suttung's daughter Gunlad was there, of course, guarding the vats of mead. But when the snake that had just fallen through the wall took the shape of a handsome man and offered to sleep with her for three nights in exchange for three drinks of the mead of poetry, Gunlad thought it a good bargain. He spent the three nights with her, and the stories do not say that Gunlad complained when her guest's three drinks drained all the mead there was. (Gunlad, after all, may not

have been best pleased with being locked up in a cave with her father's treasure year in and year out.) Odin didn't wait long for her reaction; he took on the shape of an eagle and flew from the cave-mouth as fast as he could.

Suttung saw the eagle rise, suspected what had happened, took an eagle's shape himself and went off in hot pursuit. Odin flew for his life, strained so hard that he spat forth some drops of the precious mead into Midgard, and made it over the walls of Asgard just before Suttung caught up with him. Suttung knew he had no chance against the host of the Aesir, so he flew away to nurse his grudge alone. Odin spat up the mead into vats which were kept under guard in Asgard. But, unlike Suttung, he did not mean to keep all that wisdom and word-skill for himself. The great Norse bards and storytellers said that Odin himself came to them and gave them a taste of the mead of poetry so that they spoke with beauty, skill and wisdom.

Then as now, there were also inferior poets who (at least according to their detractors) didn't have a gift worthy of being ascribed to Odin. The Norse had an explanation for that too: those second-rate poets had somehow gotten hold of, not a deep draught from Odin's mead, but a taste of one of the drops he spit out at random while escaping from Suttung.

Notes on The Mead of Poetry:

The events of this story comes straight from Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*. All speculations about character motives are mine.

Odin's character changes from story to story. There is the tragic and self-sacrificing hero who wins the Runes and the draught of the Water of Wisdom, and there is the successful con-man who steals the mead of poetry. One could say that in both cases Odin is simply pragmatic, that Mimir and the Norns were greater than him so he couldn't fool them, while the giants were no more than his equals. One could say that the ways of the gods are very hard for humans to understand.

But one consistent feature of Norse mythology is the evil that comes from mistreating one's guests. We shall see more of this in later stories.

Chapter 5 – Loki the Thief

Many stories in Norse mythology describe how Loki's cleverness got him and his fellow Aesir into, and back out of, trouble. Here are two stories in which Loki changes sides as readily as he changes shapes:

The Apples of Iduna

Once upon a time Loki and Odin went wandering from Asgard together to explore the wide world. After a long journey through the wild hill-country they were famished, and when they came on a herd of cattle grazing they took a fine fat ox for themselves, killed it and set the meat to cook. But though the fire blazed merrily and the heat was so fierce that the gods drew back from it, the meat stayed raw as ever.

While they wondered at this, an eagle called to them from a nearby tree, saying that if they would only let him take a share of the meat, they would find all the rest cooked to their liking. The gods agreed, but the eagle took the thighs and the shoulders of the ox for himself. Loki, enraged at his greed, seized a long branch and struck the eagle with it; but as soon as the wood touched the eagle, one end of it stuck fast to the eagle's claws, and the other end to Loki's hands, and the eagle carried Loki high into the sky, so high that his feet brushed the tops of the trees. Loki shouted, demanding and then pleading to be set down, but the eagle only laughed and flew on until Loki's arms and shoulders were ablaze with pain. At last the eagle offered to set him safe and free on the ground again, if and only if Loki would swear to steal the goddess Iduna and her apples out of Asgard and bring them into the eagle's land. Loki, who was sore and frightened, and who in any case had never taken much thought for the long term, swore to accomplish the theft. Then the eagle set Loki down, and he had time on the long walk back to the valley of the oxen to think of a false story to tell Odin about why the eagle had captured him and freed him. As they journeyed back to Asgard together, Loki thought how best he could fulfill his promise.

Iduna's apples were fair to see and sweet to taste, but their power was far greater than their beauty. It was only by eating that fruit that the gods stayed young and strong while years and centuries and ages of the world rolled by. So it is no wonder that Iduna took some pride in her fruit. Knowing this, Loki went to her and told her privately that on his journey he had found an apple tree growing in the midst of a great forest, a beautiful and prolific tree whose apples were far better than Iduna's own. Iduna, caught between wondering curiosity and jealousy, agreed to go with Loki to see this wonder-tree. He persuaded her to take her own apples along with her for comparison, in case the delights of the wild apple tree had seemed greater simply because he came to it weary and hungry and thirsty. So she took the ripe fruit

with her and hurried after Loki into the wild country. And when they were far away from Asgard the eagle flew down, seized Iduna and carried her far and far away to his home in Thrymheim, the mountains of thunder, in the midst of Jotunheim, the cold bleak world of the giants. There he set her down and revealed his true form and name: he was Thiassi, a frost-giant delighted to see the gods robbed of their strength and length of days. This seemed to remove all need for the giants to make war on the gods: the giants could simply wait in unwithering strength until the gods grew old and died, and then Asgard and all the world would be in their hands.

At first, the giants seemed likely to get their wish. With Iduna gone, the fruit of immortality no longer grew in Asgard. The gods wondered at her absence and feared for her—and also for themselves. Their hair grew grey, their strength faded, and they felt old age overcoming them all. Odin gazed across the Worlds but saw no sign of Iduna, who had been carefully hidden. Then the gods took counsel among themselves, trying to remember who had last seen Iduna; and someone recalled seeing her go out from Asgard with Loki.

Loki was seized, dragged into the council, and threatened once again with torture or with death if he failed to restore Iduna. Loki pled for his life with the council as he had with Thiassi and promised that he would bring Iduna back. But he would, he said, need help. Frigg lent him her feather-cloak that let him take on the form of a bird, and Loki in a falcon's shape flew far into Jotunheim.

Luck was with Loki that day. He saw Thiassi in a boat on the cold sea alone, and he found Iduna alone also in Thiassi's fastness in the mountains. There was no way for her to escape on foot and alone, but she was willing and eager to go back to Asgard. Loki enchanted her into the shape of a nut, clutched her in his talons and flew homeward.

But when Thiassi came home to find Iduna missing he guessed which way she'd gone. He took on his eagle-shape and flew toward Asgard, and long before he reached the city of the gods, he caught sight of the falcon flying ahead of him. Now, a falcon is a fine swift flier, but an eagle is faster and stronger. Thiassi gained on Loki, who strained his wings and his heart as he hurried desperately for the safety of his home.

The gods looked out from the walls of Asgard and saw the falcon, and the eagle too. They piled dry wood shavings atop the walls and waited with lit torches in their hands.

Loki heaved himself over the walls of Asgard mere yards ahead of his pursuers and fell to the ground inside, shaken and exhausted. The nut rolled from his talons, and Iduna rose and laughed for joy to be home again .

The gods dropped their torches into the piles of shavings and leaped down from the walls as Thiassi, flying too fast and fiercely to turn or stop, soared into a wall of flame. The fire burned his eagle-guise away. He fell to the ground inside the walls in giant's shape, and there the gods killed him.

Sif's Golden Hair

Sometimes Loki stole to save his life. Sometimes he seems to have done it for mere mischief.

Sif was the wife of Odin's hot-tempered son Thor. She was surpassingly beautiful, and her greatest glory was her golden hair, which gleamed like living sunlight. But one day Loki saw her sleeping, and on an impulse, he crept up to her and shaved her head. Sif woke, discovered her baldness, and was both furious and ashamed. Thor was simply furious. He thought Loki the likeliest one to have done such a mean and pointless thing, and he stormed into where Loki sat and promised to break every bone in Loki's body. Loki didn't deny Thor's accusation, but he thought that a price too high to pay for a joke. He told Thor that no lasting harm had been done, and then swore a binding oath that he would soon restore Sif's hair to its former beauty. As soon as Thor let him go, Loki hurried to the dwarf brothers Sindre and Brok and asked them if they could forge beautiful golden hair that would take root and grow in the head of a living woman. It is not recorded that Loki offered to pay them, or that he did pay them. These dwarves, it seems, took delight in their work for its own sake. They made the hair that Loki requested, and they created two other wonders for Loki to present to the gods. One was a spear which would never miss its mark. The other was a ship made with such enchantments that it would always have a favorable wind, and the greatest wonder about that ship was that, when not needed, it could be folded like a napkin and kept in the shipowner's pocket.

Perhaps the sight of such treasures made Loki greedy. Perhaps the dwarves' skill made Loki jealous, and he wanted to provoke them. Whatever his reasons, he told them that surely they would never be able to produce such wonders again. They took offense at that. Loki took it a step further, wagering his head against Brok's that they could not make three treasures even more wondrous than the first. Now Brok was the assistant, not the master-smith himself, but his confidence in his brother was absolute, and he took up the wager.

Sindre accepted the challenge his brother had set. He put a pig-skin in the furnace and told Brok to work the bellows steadily, never letting up, or else the work would be spoiled. Brok set to work, but as he did a fly settled on his hand and bit him hard. He ignored the pain and kept at the bellows until Sindre returned to open the furnace—and out stepped a shining boar with bristles of gold. Sindre then placed gold in

the furnace and went away, leaving his brother the same instructions as before. Brok blew the bellows faithfully, although the fly returned and gave him a deeper and more painful bite on his neck which throbbed ever more fiercely as the furnace blazed hotter. Sindre pulled a gold ring from the furnace, threw some iron in, and told his brother once again to work the bellows with absolutely no hesitation, lest the last and greatest of his works should turn out to be worthless. Brok set to work again, but the fly came back, and this time it stung his eyelids so that the blood ran down and blinded him. Brok stopped the bellows for a moment so he could swat the fly away; and the fly, which seemed to have an unusually strong sense of self-preservation, took itself off and stopped troubling him. But when Sindre came back for the last time he was angry with Brok, saying that Brok's interruption had very nearly spoiled the work. He drew out a strong and heavy hammer... with an unfortunately short handle, apparently spoiled by Brok's distraction.

Loki was waiting at the smithy door in his own shape, and if he had in the meantime been the fly that tormented Brok neither Sindre nor Brok could prove it, then or later. Brok took the treasures his brother had made, and he and Loki journeyed back to Asgard together. Side by side they stood before the assembly, explained the wager, and showed the treasures. Three gods were appointed to receive and judge the gifts: Odin, Thor, and the god Frey, Freya's brother.

Loki gave Thor the golden hair (which rooted itself in Sif's head and grew splendidly), and Thor saw no more need to break all his bones. Loki gave to Odin the spear that never missed its mark, and to Frey the folding ship whose sails could fill with the wonder-wind and bear it swiftly wherever Frey desired. And the gods marveled and were glad.

Then Brok stepped forward with the second set of gifts. To Frey he gave the golden boar, explaining that it could run as fast as the very best of horses, that it could run over the waves of the sea and the winds of the sky as though they were solid ground, and moreover that it would shine and cast a light about it even in the deepest darkness. To Odin he gave the ring, explaining that every ninth night it would produce eight other rings as heavy as itself. And to Thor he gave the iron hammer, saying that it could strike the hardest thing in the world without being harmed, would never miss its mark when thrown, and would always return to its maker's hand; besides, he said, at Thor's word the hammer would shrink to a tiny thing easy to conceal in the folds of his clothing. Brok ruefully acknowledged that the hammer had one fault—its handle was rather too short.

The gods admired the beauty and perfection of the other gifts, but they judged that the flawed gift, the short-handled hammer, was the

best of them all, because it could be used to great effect against the frost-giants. Brok, therefore, had won his wager.

Loki, alarmed, offered to give costly gifts in order to keep his head on his shoulders. But Brok—perhaps remembering the biting of the fly—said he wanted nothing but Loki's head. "Take it, then," Loki said, leaping away. For Loki had a treasure of his own—shoes that let him run swift and light over the air and the sea; and Brok, who had no such thing, could not catch him. Brok demanded that Thor bring him back, and Thor—perhaps grateful for his gifts, perhaps wanting to avoid dishonor for the gods, perhaps still angry with Loki about Sif's hair—chased Loki, caught him and hauled him back before Brok and the court of the gods.

Loki didn't beg—not that it would have done him any good. Instead, he said that Brok had won his head, well and good, but the wager had said nothing about his neck, and if Brok couldn't remove his head without spoiling his neck, then Brok would just have to go home empty-handed. Brok, incensed, summoned an awl from the air, bored holes in Loki's lips and sewed his mouth shut before Loki could think of a legal objection. None of the gods seem to have objected to this either—perhaps because most of them had suffered from Loki's taunts, his lies, and his dangerous advice. Nevertheless, Loki managed somehow or other to get his lips unsewn, for his perilous words come up in many stories from a later time.

Notes:

The story of Iduna's apples and Sif's hair are found in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál*.

Dwarves seem to have been a very varied lot in the early Norse world: there are the greedy and murderous ones who killed Kvase in the tale of the Mead of Poetry, and the honorable master-craftsmen in the Binding of Fenrir and the tale of Sif.

Chapter 6 – Love and Trouble

Sif and Thor seem to have lived together happily enough, except for the brief stress of her hair being stolen. Some of the Norse deities found love rather more trying. Here are two of their stories:

The Marriage of Skadi

Chapter 5 told how Iduna's captor Thiassi was killed by the gods after he kidnapped her and then pursued her and Loki back to Asgard. When Thiassi was dead the gods celebrated the defeat of another enemy as well as the restoration of Iduna and of their own lives. That night they ate again of the fruit of immortality: the grey left their hair, and the tiredness left their limbs, and they knew themselves to be immortal again.

But their feasting was rudely interrupted when the door of the great hall crashed open and a woman stormed in, a tall muscular woman in full armor with snow in her hair, fire in her eyes and a sword in her hand. She announced herself as Skadi, the daughter of Thiassi, come to avenge his death.

Presumably the gods could have fallen on her together and killed her as they'd killed her father—or, in a more honorable frame of mind, sent one of their number to meet her in single combat, although this might have been dangerous for them, as Skadi was strong, war-trained and also coldly furious. But the gods, rejoicing in their restoration, were in a kind mood. Instead of fighting, they offered her a blood-price for her father's death. (This would not have been seen as a bribe; among gods and men in those days, the paying of a blood-price was an honorable way of acknowledging the dead and preventing endless blood-feuds.) Skadi told them she had no need of money, as her father had been wealthy and she was his sole heir. They asked, then, what manner of price she might accept.

Two things became clear: Skadi wished her father to be honored, and she was bitterly sad and lonely after his death. These things the gods offered to put right. Odin placed Thiassi's eyes in the sky where they shone as stars forever after. Loki promised to make her laugh, a thing which she had thought never to do again in her grief. She said he was welcome to try, but she doubted his ability. Loki brought a billy-goat into the hall, tied a cord around its beard and tied the other end to his own genitals, and they commenced a tug-of-war, both shrieking and staggering; at last Loki collapsed into Skadi's lap, and found her laughing, much to her surprise.

To ease her loneliness, they told her that she might choose herself a husband from among the gods. They added one condition, however—her prospective husbands would cover themselves with cloaks so that she could see only their feet, and she must choose based on their feet.

Skadi wanted to marry Balder, the peace-bringer and the fairest of the gods, and she chose what she thought were the shapeliest feet presented to her. But when her chosen husband pulled back his hood she looked into the eyes, not of Balder, but of another peace-bringer—the sea-god Njord, who was sent as a hostage from the Vanir to make peace between them and the Aesir. Perhaps neither party to the marriage was entirely pleased; still, it was better for that feast to end in marriage than in killing.

The next problem was where the couple should live. Skadi, who was a skier and a huntress, wanted Njord to return with her to the icy mountains of Thrymheim. Njord wanted Skadi to live with him at the edge of the sea. They agreed that he would spend nine nights with her, she would spend nine nights with him, and then they'd settle the matter on a long-term basis.

Njord was bitterly unhappy after nine nights in Thrymheim. He hated the howling of the wolves; he missed the calls of the seabirds and the sound of the waves. He kept his bargain and stayed, but it seems likely that he and his wife had little joy of each other there. Then they came together to Njord's home in Noatun. Skadi was miserable there; she hated the screaming of the seabirds, who woke her in the small hours of the morning with what struck her as loathsome caterwauling. When the nine days were up she took herself off to Thrymheim alone, leaving her new husband by himself again in Noatun.

How Gerd Was Won

Njord's son Frey, like Freya his sister, was very beautiful and a bringer of great joy. Men sacrificed to him at their weddings and at their harvest-times, and Frey loved and blessed all that grew and was fruitful. Also like Freya, Frey was curious, unafraid, and not much interested in following anyone else's rules. So one day when Odin was away Frey went secretly into Odin's hold at Valaskjalf and sat down in the high seat whose occupant could see into every world that hangs on Yggdrasil—sat in the seat reserved for Odin alone.

Frey gazed in wonder across the wide worlds. He saw the living fires of Muspelheim and the great giant Surt who sits there, brooding on the time of the end when he will come upon Asgard in fire and burn the gods away. He saw the Midgard Serpent thrashing in the depths of the Great Sea. He saw, also, the beauty of the tossing sea and the tall mountains.

Looking to the north, he saw what was to him the loveliest and most dangerous thing of all. He saw a house high-built and beautiful, set in the midst of fair and fruitful lands, and he saw a figure walking toward its door. The enchanted vision that Valaskjalf gives allowed Frey to see her clearly. She was a giantess, and withal the most

beautiful woman in the world. She raised her hands to open the doors of the house, and Frey, watching with his heart in his throat, saw brightness break from her hands. The light that went out from her illumined all the worlds. He saw her brightness laid on the waves of the sea and the wings of the sea-birds and the wind-swelled sails of the ships, her radiance blazing from the mountains where the sun struck the ice, her light quickening the moving leaves of all the trees in all the forests of the world. And he looked back at her again: a giantess, a daughter of his enemies, and beautiful beyond bearing.

He climbed down from the high seat with slow steps, moving wearily as in the time when Iduna was stolen away, and old age fell on the gods: but it was his heart that pained and failed him, not the strength of his limbs. He went back to his own house, bowed and silent. He did not answer those who greeted him. He did not eat or drink or sleep; his face grew hollow with hunger and his eyes with watching. But if any of the gods turned to him in concern and would have asked what ailed him, he looked at them so forbiddingly from his ruined face that they turned away and left him to his silence.

Njord feared for his son but couldn't quite bring himself to speak to Frey face to face. Instead he summoned Frey's servant Skirnir and told him to go and ask Frey what had brought such bitterness on him. Skirnir was very reluctant to undertake the task, and protested that Frey's answer was likely to be evil. Perhaps he feared that Frey would attack him. Perhaps he knew where Frey had gone and feared that in the high place Frey had seen some horror that would eat Skirnir up from within as it had eaten Frey, even told secondhand. But it may have gone deeper than that. Skirnir and Frey had been young together, and had long trusted each other; Skirnir loved Frey, and perhaps more than anything else he feared knowing what ailed Frey and being unable to cure it. In any case, Njord grew more demanding, and finally Skirnir agreed.

Skirnir went to Frey and forced himself to speak before looking Frey in the face. He might have been surprised when Frey answered him immediately, not with blows or curses, but with a simple explanation. At least, as simple as Frey could make it. He tried haltingly to describe the beauty he had seen. He added plainly enough that if he did not see that radiant woman face to face very soon, and if she did not agree to be his, he believed he would die. Finally he commanded Skirnir to go and get the woman to come to him, with or without her father's consent. This was a daunting task, given the enmity between gods and giants, but Frey promised to reward Skirnir richly if he succeeded.

Skirnir accepted the errand, but he named his own price: Frey's horse that could ride safely through the places of greatest peril, and Frey's sword, a wondrous weapon that fought masterfully of its own accord.

These might indeed help Skirnir if he met trouble in the lands of the giants, but if he won Gerd for Frey he stipulated that they should be his forever. And Frey, thinking of nothing but the strength of his desire, agreed.

So Skirnir rode over the wild wastes, and came at last to the house of Gymir, Gerd's father. A ring of leaping fire circled Gymir's lands, but on Frey's wonder-horse Skirnir rode safely through them into the green lands of Gymir's holding. But Gymir's great hounds snarled and leaped at him as he tried to rise toward the gate. Skirnir thought that killing Gerd's father's dogs was no good beginning to winning her heart, so he turned his horse aside and rode through the fields until he found a herdsman keeping watch over Gymir's cattle. Skirnir asked that man how he might get safely past the dogs and have a word with Gerd. The herdsman asked Skirnir what made him so eager to die. Skirnir answered that the day of his death was already fated, and timidity wouldn't put it off; he insisted on speaking with Gerd and headed back for the gate and the dogs.

Either the dogs' yelping or the herdsman's objections grew loud enough so that Gerd overheard the noise and asked what was happening. On being told that a guest stood outside and demanded admittance, she ordered the servants to hold the dogs and let him in, which they did. Then she demanded to know who he was, saying she did not think anyone but a god could have come through the boundary fires.

Skirnir said that he wasn't a god, brushed aside other questions and went straight to the business of wooing. He seems to have taken a transactional, rather than romantic, approach. First he offered Gerd eleven apples of pure gold to buy her promise that Frey would be her dearest. Gerd said she didn't want his apples and would never live with Frey. Then he offered a very precious ring, one that Odin had once given to his much-loved son Balder. (No tale that remains to us explains how Frey or Skirnir got hold of that.) Gerd said her father was wealthy enough and such trinkets didn't tempt her.

At this Skirnir lost his temper, drew Frey's marvelous sword, and informed Gerd that he'd cut her head off with it if she didn't immediately consent to marry Frey. Gerd said she wasn't going to give herself to any man under threat, and furthermore that any damage done to her would be amply repaid by her father. Skirnir said that her father was no match for Frey's magic sword. Gerd simply glared at him and returned no answer at all. And Skirnir, probably reflecting that Frey would neither thank him nor recover if Skirnir brought Gerd back dead, sheathed the sword again. But he had not abandoned his errand.

Frey's gifts having failed him, Skirnir drew out his own magic staff

and laid a curse on Gerd if she should continue to refuse Frey. He told her that the curse would drive her away from her father's house and all good company, to the cold wastes near the gates of Hel's kingdom, with fury in her brain and pain in her heart; that her face would be horribly changed so that all men would marvel at it; that she would no longer desire food or drink, or anything in the bright world, save for a man's love, which would never be given to her. He wrote the rune-signs for longing and madness and lust, to bind her with unless she gave her promise. While he did not say so to Gerd, Skirnir seemed to be wishing on her the same terrible change that the mad longing and lust for her had wrought on Frey whom Skirnir had loved from childhood.

Gerd feared such a fate more than she feared death. She told Skirnir to call off his curse and gave her promise to go out into the wilds in nine days, meet Frey and give him his heart's desire .

Skirnir returned, rejoicing in his success and apparently untroubled by his manner of winning it—though he told Frey only the result, not how it was obtained. Frey didn't ask questions, but only lamented the delay, which seemed long to him—many times, he said, a month had gone by more quickly for him than any one of the nights in which he had to wait for his bride. But when she came to him, health and happiness returned to him, and joy poured out of him as light had poured out of her.

Some of his fellow gods were less enthused. Odin heard it prophesied that Frey, having given away his wonder-sword to win his heart's desire, would be weaponless on the day of Ragnarok when the giants and monsters came to battle the gods, and for want of that weapon both Frey and the gods would fall. Odin may have grieved for it, but it was Loki who taunted Frey for a witless and short-sighted creature who threw away his defense for the sake of a giant girl.

Frey's joy in Gerd was too great to be dimmed by such considerations. He had his present delight and was content to wait for whatever terrors the future might bring.

What did Gerd think? Did she find some joy with Frey? Did she take some satisfaction in the thought that his pursuit of her would eventually be his undoing? Did she ever tell him that she'd agreed to come to him under duress? The stories that are left to us don't answer any of these questions.

Notes:

The tale of Njord and Skadi comes mainly from Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* . Scholar Daniel McCoy says that Skadi was worshipped as a goddess in ancient Scandinavia, though her association with the Aesir gods was brief.

The story of Frey and Gerd exists in somewhat different versions. It's alluded to in the Poetic Edda *Lokasenna* (The Wrangling of Loki) and told at length in the Poetic Edda *Skirnismol* (The Ballad of Skirnir) as well as in the *Gylfaginning*. I read the version in the *Gylfaginning* first; this describes Frey's vision of Gerd, his desperate longing, his giving up his sword and therefore eventually his life out of longing for her, and then cuts to her consent to marry him (which, according to Snorri, is what Frey wanted.) This version seemed a rather sweet romantic tale. Later I read *Skirnismol*. The minor difference there is that Frey may well be seeking a tryst not a marriage; the important change which darkens the plot is Skirnir's threats to Gerd. *Skirnismol* was written first, and in some parts the *Gylfaginning* follows it closely. Does Snorri leave out the threats because Norse culture was beginning to take a somewhat different view of consent? This question also remains unanswered.

Notes on how Frey was worshipped come from Daniel McCoy at <https://norse-mythology.org/>

Chapter 7 – Thor the Bride

Thor, Odin's hot-tempered son, was an inveterate enemy of the giants. Given his great strength, and the additional power given him by the hammer Mjöllnir whose other name is the lightning, he often took the fight to them directly. Some giants were brave and foolish enough to accept this challenge; some of the ensuing duels were long and dramatic, but Thor always won them. After a while, the giants learned to avoid open struggle against Thor—not that this ended the enmity on either side, as the following tale will show.

One day Thor woke and missed Mjöllnir. He searched the house, and then the city, growing ever more frantic, but the hammer was nowhere to be found. As usual when something was mysteriously wrong, Thor suspected Loki and went after him to demand an explanation for the hammer's disappearance. Loki managed to convince Thor that for once Loki hadn't stolen it himself, and he also volunteered to go and look for it—possibly to keep himself out of Thor's reach in case Thor began to doubt his story. He borrowed Freya's feather-cloak again and flew to Jotunheim.

Once he got there, he seems to have had a shrewd idea of just where to look. Whether he'd had some part in the theft after all, or whether as an experienced thief he knew how to recognize another thief, the story doesn't say; but Loki made his way to the home of Thrym (whose name means Loud), the richest and mightiest of the giants. Thrym was in his stables, tending the dogs and horses—humble work, perhaps, but the leashes of the dogs and the harnesses of the horses were of pure gold. He laughed when he saw Loki alighting, asked how the gods found themselves and inquired what brought Loki into the land of the giants alone. There may or may not have been a threat in the latter question. At any rate, Loki departed from his usual practice and gave him a straight answer: the gods found themselves in a bad case, and Loki had come to ask if Thrym had hidden Thor's hammer.

Thrym, like Frey, seems to have been less concerned with the war between gods and giants than with his immediate wants. He answered freely that he had indeed taken Thor's hammer and buried it eight miles underground, and the gods would not see it again unless they sent him Freya to be his wife. He let Loki leave freely to carry that demand back to Asgard, which Loki did.

Thor went straight to Freya and told her to hurry and put on wedding clothes so they could get his hammer back. Freya gave a thunderous snort, swelled with anger so that she broke the chain on her precious necklace, and let Thor know in no uncertain terms that she'd be the laughingstock of Asgard if she went and let some giant paw her around just to retrieve something Thor was careless enough to lose.

Let him solve his own problems, she said, without dragging her into the mud.

The gods met in council. Giving Freya away against her will was a repellent idea, even if they could have forced her to go (a somewhat doubtful proposition), and even if Thrym would have been contented with a Freya who was spitting fury and trying to kill him. Leaving Mjöllnir in the hands of the giants was equally unthinkable.

Heimdall, one of the calmer and wiser gods, suggested that Thor, rather than Freya, should put on bridal garments and pay a call on Thrym. Thor was as outraged as Freya had been and protested that the gods would call him unmanly if they knew he'd been seen in women's attire. Loki, thinking ahead for once in his life, observed that if Thor refused to go, the opinion of the gods would matter very little, as the giants with the help of Mjöllnir could, and probably would, come and destroy them all. To soften the blow—or else to get full enjoyment of the joke—Loki offered to wear women's clothing too and go along as “Freya's maidservant” so he could offer whatever assistance might be necessary for retrieving the hammer before Thrym realized he'd been cheated of his bride.

Thor agreed, albeit with great reluctance, and the gods dressed him in full bridal splendor, with keys at his waist, rings on his fingers, gems on his breast, Freya's amber necklace (with a newly mended, and somewhat lengthened, chain) round his neck, a veil over his face and a pretty cap on his head. Loki was cautious enough not to snicker audibly, since Thor had changed only his garments not the shape of his body, and even without his hammer, he was strong enough to give a serious beating to anyone who offended him. “Freya” and her “maid” climbed into Thor's goat-drawn chariot and drove away at full speed for Thrymsheim.

Thrym saw them coming from afar and was overjoyed. He had his servants clean the great hall and display all his choicest treasures prominently; gazing around at the splendor, he said that surely, he already had every beautiful thing that could be wanted in the world, except Freya only, and now she was coming. He made his cooks prepare a great feast in her honor.

“Freya” alighted from her chariot, perhaps a little more heavily than Thrym had expected, but she kept her veil down—this, her (equally veiled) maidservant explained, was the custom of modest goddesses before marriage. Modesty, however, did not prevent “Freya” from eating, all by herself, a whole ox and eight salmon, and washing them down with three tons of mead. Thrym was startled, and perhaps began to think about the expense of keeping such a wife; he exclaimed that he had never before seen a bride with such a keen appetite. Loki, as usual, had an excuse at hand; he explained in his demure

maidservant's voice that Freya had fasted for eight days and nights in the heat of her longing for Jotunheim. Thrym, flattered, accepted the explanation and approached his bride more closely, desiring to kiss her, but her eyes met his through the bridal veil, and he leaped backward, exclaiming that her eyes were fearsome and seemed actually to burn. The maidservant hastened to explain that Freya had not slept for eight nights, so hot was her longing for Jotunheim .

Thrym's sister stepped forward then and said that if Freya wanted to be welcomed by her as a dear sister, a very dear sister, then she would immediately give over the rings on her fingers in token of kinship and friendship. (This sort of gift-giving by the bride seems to have been customary, though perhaps asking brazenly for it was not.) "Freya" didn't answer, and Thrym, remembering her burning eyes, seems to have decided a distraction was needed. He called his servants to bring out Thor's hammer and lay it on the maiden's knees so they could swear their marriage vows on it.

The servants obeyed, but the vows were never sworn. As soon as the hammer touched his knees Thor lifted it and struck down the eager bridegroom Thrym, and after him the sister who had wanted his gold so badly. They say that the only living creatures who left Thrym's great hall that day were Loki and Thor.

Notes:

The tale of Thor the Bride is told, in a clear and lively way, in the Poetic Edda *Thrymskvitha* (The Lay of Thrym). It's also one of the few tales which shows Loki clearly and unequivocally helping the gods—although his quick wit and readiness to deceive appear as clearly here as elsewhere.

Chapter 8 – Thor’s Adventures in Utgard

After this time Thor and Loki became friendlier with each other for a while, and one day they climbed into Thor’s goat-drawn chariot together and went to explore in the wide world. At the end of the first day, they came to a farmer’s house and asked for lodging for the night. They were made welcome—indeed any man or woman who had a house and turned away a guest would have been shamed; but the man and woman of the house whispered anxiously to each other about what they might feed their guests, for it had been a hard year.

Thor overheard this and told them not to worry, as he would provide the food. He slaughtered the goats that pulled his chariot, roasted them over the fire, and invited the farmer’s family to eat with him and Loki. They accepted the invitation, and he told them, when they had eaten the meat, to throw the bones of the goats onto their hides which lay nearby. They did this; but the farmer’s son, Thialfi, who was very hungry, broke one of the bones to suck the marrow.

That night Loki and Thor slept in the farmer’s house, and in the morning, Thor took up his hammer and blessed the hides and bones of the goats. At once the bones were covered with flesh, and the flesh with hide, and the goats breathed and pawed at the ground; but one of them was lame in its hind leg, in the bone that Thialfi had broken.

The farmer’s family had watched in wonder, which turned to horror as they saw the goat limping, and Thor glowering and raising his hammer to strike the offender. All four of them—the farmer, his wife, his son Thialfi and his daughter Röskva—knelt and cried out for mercy, promising to give all they had as atonement for what Thialfi had done. They knew, however, how little they could offer, and they had heard tales of Thor’s fierce anger, and they despaired of mercy.

Thor, seeing their terror, felt the anger draining out of him. He told them to get up and swore that they would live. But he told Thialfi and Röskva to follow him and serve him, which they did. Thor went on foot, his goat being lamed, and Loki walked with him, and the new servants of the gods followed after, carrying the luggage which had been in the goat-cart. They traveled in lands as new to the gods as to the children, and by nightfall, they were wandering in a pathless forest.

But when they thought to take shelter for the night, they came suddenly upon a great hall, with an open door running the full width of the wide front wall. They called out, announcing their coming and asking hospitality, but no one answered. When they went in they found neither occupants nor furniture, and there seemed to be something wrong about the shape of the walls; still they found it better than sleeping uncovered in the wild wood, so they stayed

inside, although they preferred not to go too far in from the open door. But when they woke in the night to feel the earth shaking beneath them, Loki and the servants crept away into a narrower side hall, while Thor kept watch near the door with Mjöllnir in his hands. Later again there was a terrible sound of thundering, and a strange whining noise of wind. Thor got no sleep, but no visible foe came for him to fight. In the morning they rose and left in haste, hoping to spend the next night in greater peace.

They had not gone far when they heard the terrible thundering and whining again, and as they crept cautiously nearer the source of the sound they came into a clearing and saw a vast man lying fast asleep in the wood and snoring mightily. Thor was reckoned tall and strong, but he looked like an infant next to that sleeping man. Thor put his hands to the belt which held his reserves of power, called all his strength into him and lifted Mjöllnir. As he did so the man woke and rose to his feet, towering over the gods and their servants. Then, they say, for the first time in his life Thor was afraid. It was only with an effort that he kept his voice steady as he asked the stranger's name.

The stranger called himself Skrymir. He said he had no need to ask Thor's name, but he did wonder what Thor had done with his (Skrymir's) glove. Then, looking about him, he strode through the trees and returned carrying what Thor saw clearly as the strange hall where he and his companions had sheltered in the night. He offered to travel with Thor and his companions and to carry their provision-bag, and Thor agreed. This was a relief to Röskva and Thialfi, who were tired of carrying; but it soon became clear that Thor's company could not keep up with Skrymir's great strides. Skrymir said he'd go on ahead and they could meet him in time for the evening meal. It was deep night when they caught up with him, and he said that he had eaten already but they were welcome to take their own food from the provision-bag and make their dinner. Having said this, he lay down to sleep. Thor went to untie the cord at the neck of the provision-bag, and he was completely unable to loosen it.

Thor wondered at the strength that had tied such a knot. He was ashamed to wake Skrymir and confess himself too weak to untie some cords. He was also hungry, afraid, and inclined to think that Skrymir was mocking at them and wished them no good. Finally he lost his temper, strode over to the sleeping Skrymir and struck him what should have been a death-blow on the head with the thunder-hammer. And Skrymir grunted, opened an eye, said that he thought a leaf must have fallen on his head and waked him and asked if Thor and his fellows were ready to sleep yet. Yes, Thor said sheepishly, they were just going to sleep.

They withdrew and slept at some distance from Skrymir. Again in the

middle of the night Thor crept to Skrymir's side and tried to kill him. This time he saw the hammer bury itself deep in Skrymir's head...but Skrymir said, without opening his eyes, that an acorn seemed to have fallen on him, and asked if it was morning yet, or if Thor wanted something. No, Thor said, there was still time to sleep, and he was fine .

He withdrew, brooded, came back and struck one final blow just as the light was rising. Skrymir blinked, yawned, and said it must be morning now, for the birds had shaken dirt down on him. He added that plainly Thor couldn't keep Skrymir's pace, so Thor had better go on alone; but by Skrymir's advice Thor would change his course so as to avoid the great castle of Utgard which lay in his path, for all its inhabitants were as large and strong as Skrymir, and they were not likely to look kindly on insolent words from midgets and children like Thor and his companions. Then Skrymir strode off into the northern hills, still carrying the bag that held Thor's provisions as well as his own, and Thor and Loki did not wish him Godspeed on his journey.

They did not turn aside to avoid coming to Utgard either. Thor had never before been found small and weak, had never before been afraid. Perhaps the fear was the thing that troubled him most and he resolved to face it down. Also, he had Loki at his side, and Loki could be counted on to remember, and recount, possibly with dramatic embellishments, anything embarrassing that happened to Thor. Thor hoped that Loki had slept during his unsuccessful attacks on Skrymir, but Loki had certainly seen his unavailing struggles to open the bag and heard Skrymir's taunting words. Well, he was not going to let Loki say that Thor, the greatest warrior of the Aesir, had turned away in fear from an enemy he had not even met. He walked straight for Utgard, hungry and angry, and his companions followed him.

They came to Utgard at midday, and looked up, and up, and up again, craning their necks painfully, at the castle walls stretching into the sky. There was a grating over the gateway. No one seemed to hear their knocking, and all Thor's strength did not serve to open the grating, but at last, they squeezed themselves between the bars and came to the open door of the great hall. There they saw high tables and huge men, most of them as big as Skrymir, who laughed to see the little ones who came in among them. Thor lifted his chin, set his teeth and marched straight ahead until he stood before the great chair of the King of that place, Utgard-Loke himself. Utgard-Loke ignored him at first, and then he smiled scornfully over his teeth and asked if that toddler there was really the god Thor of whom so many great tales were told. Thor acknowledged his name. Utgard-Loke said musingly that perhaps after all Thor had some good qualities that didn't appear at first sight. Could he do anything impressive, Utgard-Loke asked, to

earn his place in the hall since they didn't have space or food to spare for weaklings?

Loki answered quickly before Thor's temper could prompt him to give an answer that would get them all killed. Loki offered to out-eat any man present in the hall. Utgard-Loki summoned a man named Logi from the benches to compete with Loke, and a great trough full of food was set between them. Loki fell to with a will. He had, after all, walked hard for two days with nothing to eat, and his appetite at most times seems to have been as lively as his cunning. And indeed, he met Logi, who had started from the other end, at the midpoint of the trough—but while Loki had eaten all the meat in the trough, Logi had also eaten up the bones and the trough itself, and even Loki couldn't claim to have won that round.

Thialfi spoke up then, offering to take any of Utgard-Loke's men on in a footrace. Utgard-Loke summoned a mere boy named Hugi, who was smaller than most of the folk of Utgard and set him on to race against Thialfi. Thialfi ran, and Thor, watching, thought that even among the gods Thialfi would have been thought uncommonly swift-footed; but Hugi touched the final goalpost and turned back to meet Thialfi on the way. Utgard-Loke said that perhaps Thialfi had just started to limber up his legs and they should give him another chance. Thialfi ran even better than he had run before, but Hugi outpaced him by an even greater distance. Utgard-Loke called for one more trial. Thialfi, shaking with exhaustion, pushed himself and ran as hard as he could, but before he reached the mid-course Hugi had reached the end.

Utgard-Loke tutted and asked what Thor himself could do. Thor, who was even more unwilling to refuse a contest than to lose it, suggested a drinking contest. So Utgard-Loke offered him a drinking horn, saying that the strong men in Utgard could drain it at one gulp, the middling men at two, and the weakest at three. Thor took up the horn and drank long and deep, but there seemed to be no end to the liquor in the horn; at last, with his brain reeling and his lungs burning, he lowered it from his lips and saw that he had hardly changed its level. Utgard-Loke shook his head and said he'd never have believed, if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes, that Thor was so puny a drinker; but of course he could have another chance. Thor drank again, but still when he came up for air the horn was mostly full, and Utgard-Loke said that clearly Thor's reputation was greatly exaggerated. Thor drank again with the full force of his fury, and when he lowered the horn from his lips the liquor in it was visibly reduced—but the horn was still more than half full.

Utgard-Loke pronounced himself unimpressed but graciously offered Thor a chance to redeem himself at some other game. Thor agreed grouchyly to try any game Utgard-Loke might propose, and Utgard-

Loke said it seemed right to let him try a game that the children of Utgard enjoyed: that was to pick up Utgard-Loke's cat. It was indeed a rather large cat, but only a cat for all that, and Thor was ashamed to be given such an easy task. He strode over and made to pick the cat up with one hand. But what a cat that was! It was terribly heavy, heavier than a cat made of iron, but supple and stretchy as a cat made of wax on a hot midsummer's day. He lifted with both arms, and its belly rose as he lifted, but its feet remained on the floor. He heaved and strained, and at last got one foot up off the ground—but his arms were at full stretch and his strength spent by then, and three of the cat's feet still on the ground. Utgard-Loke shrugged and said nothing better could have been expected of such a little man.

Shaking with shame and anger, Thor offered to wrestle any man in the hall. Utgard-Loke answered scornfully that no man there would debase himself to wrestle such a weak and childish fellow as Thor had shown himself to be, but if Thor was so keen on wrestling as all that Utgard-Loke's old nurse Elli would give him a fall. The woman who rose at these words looked so frail and so old, with her trembling hands and her skin thin and loose on her frame, that Thor thought it a shame to grapple with her; but when Utgard-Loke suggested that he was afraid of an old woman, Thor bit his lips and went out to meet her. And, frail as she looked, she was immovable. All Thor's best efforts to lift her, throw her or topple her were unavailing; she stood like a statue of perfect frailness—a statue of stone. But when she bent her weight against Thor he felt himself weakened as he had been when Iduna's apples were stolen, and he sank to his knee. Utgard-Loke called off the match then, and said that, while Thor and his companions had not earned a place by great deeds, still it was almost night and it would be a shame to turn such harmless little men out in the dark and cold. So they were feasted that night, and given a place to sleep.

In the morning Utgard-Loke gave them an ample breakfast and saw them to the gates. When they had passed the grating and stood again in the open plain, Utgard-Loke asked Thor how he had liked his journey and whether he had met any man mightier than himself. Thor said honestly that he could not pretend not to have been greatly shamed, and it galled his heart to think that the people of Utgard would mock him for his weakness ever after.

Utgard-Loke looked thoughtful at this. At last he said that, now they stood outside the castle walls, he would tell Thor the truth: that none of the folk of Utgard would mock Thor for weakness, or willingly encounter him again. For Utgard-Loke's safety lay not in his strength but in his skill with magical illusions. He had taken on the shape of Skrymir, cast a spell to make himself appear enormous in the eyes of

Thor and his companions, and bound the mouth of the provision-sack with iron when Thor was not looking. He had sat waking all through the night, and every time Thor came against him with Mjöllnir he had cast another spell of illusion and of changing distances, so that Thor drove the hammer into the mountain beyond, thinking he was striking 'Skrymir's' head. The mountain, Utgard-Loke added, was now much the worse for wear.

The folk of Utgard had been magnified by illusion, like Utgard-Loke himself; and Utgard-Loke had cast stranger and stronger spells when he set contests and tasks for the gods and their servant. Loki's opponent Logi, who devoured meat and bones and trough together, had a human semblance only through Utgard-Loke's skill; he was not man or god or giant, but wildfire itself. The boy Hugi who won the race so easily against Thialfi was no bodily being at all, but Utgard-Loke's thought given a human semblance. And as for Thor's tasks—The drinking-horn offered to him was the sea itself, made smaller by powerful spells of illusion; Utgard-Loke and his giants were afraid when they saw the deep draught he took of it (and that mocking test changed the courses of the world, for Thor's swallowing made the first ebb-tides in the great sea.) As for the gray cat, she was no cat at all, but the Midgard Serpent cunningly disguised, and Utgard-Loke trembled when he saw Thor lift one of its feet off the ground. And the last and worst of the tests, the wrestling match against the old woman, was such as none could hope to win; for she was no old woman, but old age itself, against whom not even the gods can stand forever.

Having explained this, Utgard-Loke added that it would be better both for Thor and for himself if they never met again; for Thor's strength was greater than Utgard-Loke had imagined and had dismayed all Utgard-Loke's people, but Utgard-Loke trusted to his powers of deception to save him from Thor's wrath, and perhaps humiliate Thor again for a little while, if Thor insisted on putting him to the test .

Thor, hearing this, was furious, and also quite suddenly confident again, and he swung Mjöllnir up in the air for a death-blow.... but before he could bring the hammer down on Utgard-Loke's head, head and giant and all were gone. Thor then took a great stride toward the castle gate and would have laid the place in ruins, but before his foot hit the ground, gate and wall and hall had vanished away, leaving nothing but an empty plain with the wind whistling over it. Thor stood staring across the emptiness for a long time, and then he turned homeward, astonished and ashamed; and Loki came after, laughing in his heart, and treasuring the tales that he would mock Thor with someday. And indeed, the day came when he made his mock—though it brought little joy to either god. But that tale will come later in this book.

Notes:

The story of Thor and Utgard-Loke comes from Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* . I have slightly altered the spelling of the giant king's name to help distinguish it from the trickster-god Loki; in fact both the god and the giant's names are rendered into English either as Loke or as Loki.

The story is an odd and lighthearted one; but one of what may seem to be its strangest features, Thor's insistence on journeying to Utgard even after meeting Skrymir, and his repeatedly taking on tests he was doomed to fail, strikes me as related to the deeper levels of the Norse myths. For the whole task to which Odin devoted most of his thought and Thor most of his strength, the defense of Asgard and Midgard against the giants and the monsters, the ice and fire, was also a task doomed to fail at the end, as Odin at least knew from the very beginning of days. Gods, as well as men, were expected to take up tasks which they knew they could not help but fail in. Glory came, not from ultimate victory, but from courage in facing ultimate defeat.

Chapter 9 – Odin the Host and Odin the Guest

Once upon a time, there was a king named Hrauthung who had two sons, Agnar and Geirröth. In the late autumn when Agnar was ten years old and Geirröth eight, they went out fishing together in a boat on the sea. They meant to stay in the shallows, catch a few small fish and go home again; but a great wind rose and blew from the land, and while the boys did their best to row homeward their strength was no match for that blast. The boat was driven out to sea, and the boys gave themselves up for lost. The day went down, and the darkness spread, and deep in the night, the boys felt their boat smashed against stone. They struggled to land, cold and afraid and listening anxiously for the howling of wolves. Then they saw light coming from the window of a peasant's cottage. They hurried toward the light and beat on the door. The door opened, and a man and a woman welcomed the boys in, built the fire up, and brought them food and drink.

In the morning the boys were grateful to be alive and well tended, but it was clear they could not go home. Their boat was smashed, and they didn't know how far or by what ways the wind had driven them, and in any case, the winter had descended on them in earnest: the wind howled like a great wolf, driving sleet and snow. The boys were dismayed, but the peasants said they'd gladly keep them through the winter and help them to find their way home in the spring.

So the boys stayed. The woman cared for Agnar, the King's heir, while the man tended his younger brother Geirröth. While the peasant's cottage lacked the splendor and comfort of King Hrauthung's palace, Geirröth found his new home better in one way: the peasant man told him wonderful stories and instructed him in many skills and secrets. Geirröth didn't realize that this was because the man was Odin himself in disguise, while the woman was the goddess Frigg, Odin's wife. All through the winter, the gods kept their disguises, and the boys grew and thrived.

In the spring, when the wind turned mild, and the frost released its iron grip on the earth, the man brought out a boat, and the couple walked their fosterlings to the shore and said their last goodbyes to them. The man spoke privately for a long time with Geirröth before he let him go. Then the boys climbed into the boat, and a gentle and favorable wind brought them home again, right to their father's landing-place. Geirröth was the first to get out of the boat; and as Agnar rose to follow him, Geirröth took the oars, threw them on the land behind him, and then gave the boat a great push. Agnar fell back in the boat, and Geirroth shouted, "Go thou now where evil may have thee!" And a wild wind rose and drove the boat out to sea again.

Geirröth looked about and saw that no one had witnessed what he did

to his brother. Then he hurried up from the beach to his father's great hall, rehearsing a lie for his father about how Agnar had died at sea, and he had been spared. But King Hrauthung never heard that lie. When Geirröth entered the hall, he found that his father was dead, and he was welcomed back not as the long-lost Prince but as the new King.

Years after this Odin in his own form went up to Valaskjalf, looked out over the worlds, and came back to Frigg laughing. He told her that he'd seen her fosterling Agnar in a cave begetting children on a giantess, while his fosterling Geirröth was King and ruler.

Frigg was furious at this, but she made herself laugh coldly. "And what a King he is!" she told her husband. "You taught him a host's duties well. He is so stingy that he tortures his guests if he thinks there are too many of them for him to feed without loss."

Odin denied this charge, which was one of the worst accusations that could be leveled against anyone, furiously, but it seems he was not altogether sure that he was right. From Valaskjalf he could see wherever he would, but he could not see everything at once; and Frigg was a diviner with her own ways of knowing things. So Odin made a wager with Frigg that she was wrong, and then he disguised himself as a mortal man again and made his way on foot to King Geirröth's great hall.

Frigg knew very well that what she had said about Geirröth was a lie, but she thought there was a way to make it come true enough so she would win her wager and Odin would stop crowing about how his fosterling had stolen the kingdom from hers. She sent her maidservant Fulla to King Geirröth ahead of Odin's arrival. King Geirröth welcomed her as a King should welcome a guest, and she warned him that there was a dangerous magician loose in Geirröth's kingdom who might well seek to enchant the King himself. He was a master of disguises, but nevertheless, she said, he could be recognized by one sure sign: no dog dared to bark at him. The King took the warning to heart. He had some cause to know that treachery was possible and often effective. He also may have feared that a magician would have ways of knowing what he had done to his brother Agnar, and also feared how his people might respond to knowing that truth.

Later that day a stranger came to King Geirroth's gate, a tall and tired man wrapped in a blue cloak. King Geirröth's fiercest dogs had been chained at the gate after Fulla's warning, but when they saw the wanderer, they didn't bark and leap at him. One of the guards asked who the stranger was, while the other ran to warn the King. The second guard came back quickly with several other men-at-arms and proceeded to seize the stranger, take away his weapons, bind his arms, and bring him before King Geirröth.

The King questioned the stranger closely, but the stranger in anger and pride refused to tell anything more than his name, which he gave as Grimnir. King Geirröth told him that he would speak and give a full account of himself, his origins, his purposes, and his peculiar effect on dogs, or it would be the worse for him. When Grimnir was unmoved by this threat, the King ordered his guards to bind Grimnir to a chair and set him close between two fires, which he ordered the guards to build up until the smoke choked Grimnir and pained his eyes and the heat of the fire scorched his clothing and his hair. Still, Grimnir would not speak. So King Geirröth ordered the guardsmen to leave their suspect guest there until he spoke, to feed the fire regularly, and to feed the guest nothing.

For eight days these orders were obeyed. King Geirröth's soldiers may have known that mistreating a guest brought a curse from the gods, but they surely knew that disobeying their liege lord brought guaranteed and immediate punishment. The one who finally took pity on the stranger was not a soldier or servant, but the King's own son, a ten-year-old boy whom his father, perhaps in mockery, perhaps in regret, or perhaps simply to uphold the lie that he mourned his brother who was lost by tragic mischance, had named Agnar.

Young Agnar pitied and admired the man who suffered so much and would not yield. Agnar didn't dare to or wasn't able to set the guest free, but he did bring him a horn of mead and spoke to him kindly, lamenting his father's cruelty to someone who had done him no harm. Grimnir had kept silence under torture and under threat, but the boy's kindness moved him to speak. He complained of his pain and hunger, and the fact that none had stirred to help him except Agnar alone—and he went on to say that Agnar alone would rule the Goths from then on, and that he would be rewarded more richly than any mortal ever had been for the giving of a single drink.

The guards ran to tell King Geirröth that his strange guest was speaking at last. The King came and sat by listening with his half-drawn sword on his knee, but Grimnir still spoke only to the boy, telling Agnar that he had been greeted and blessed by Odin himself. Then, though neither Agnar nor his father recognized it at first, Grimnir began to answer the King's question and speak of his origins. Long and lovingly he described the beauty of bright Asgard, the high feasts in the hall of Odin (and the fact that Odin ate nothing at that feast, but only drank—though Grimnir didn't mention it at that moment, Agnar's choice of refreshment for his guest had been well made), the shining hall where Thor and Sif lived, the great hall of Frigg where the blessed dead lived who did not go to Odin (he named Frigg without bitterness; possibly he regretted choosing Geirröth over her fosterling, and in any case he must not have known of

Fulla'serrand), the Peace Stead of Balder where no evil thing could happen, and many more. But there was a note of sorrow in his voice; for now and then he would pause in his list of splendors and say that it would remain so "until the gods go to destruction." His talk left Asgard then and came down to Midgard, describing how Odin and his brethren first shaped the world from the flesh of Ymir.

And then Grimnir lifted his head and seemed to gaze through the roof of the hall. His face became terrible and his eyes burned. He said that he had raised his face to heaven and that from heaven help would come. Then he began to name his own names. He gave the many names of his human disguises (Grim, the Hooded, Gangleri, the Wanderer, and more...) and of his godly attributes (the Much-Loved, the Overthrower, the Truth-Teller, the Deceiver, the Wide of Wisdom...) At last, he named himself Allfather and Odin. And then he told King Geirröth that he had drunk too much and acted too rashly and that he could never look again for help from heaven, for the sword that would destroy him was already being drawn and his pierced body would soon lie at Odin's feet. So saying, Grimnir called Odin's power into himself.

King Geirröth leaped up, drew his sword and hurried toward his guest. Did he think to kill him while he was still vulnerable in mortal shape? Did he mean to cut the bonds, free his guest and beg Odin's pardon? He had the chance to do neither. He shook with fear, and the sword fell from his hand hilt-first, and he fell and impaled himself on the blade. Odin vanished then, and no one knows what he and Frigg said to each other when they met again in Asgard. But back in dead King Geirröth's hall, the boy Agnar was made King straightaway. He ruled for many years, and we may guess that he was unfailingly courteous to his guests.

Notes:

This story is told in the Poetic Edda *Grimnismol* , the Ballad of Grimnir. Much of the actual narrative is in the prose prologue and epilogue, while much of the poetry is devoted to the list of the many names of the gods and their dwelling places.

The story never explicitly says that Odin told Geirröth to cast his brother adrift, though it seems to heavily imply it. Neither does the story tell what happened to the first Agnar and his giantess. The ways and the principles of the gods remain inscrutable—but the rules of conduct for human hosts seem to be quite clear.

Chapter 10 – Andvari’s Curse

One day Odin and Loki left Asgard to explore the wide world. They came to a river and walked along its banks, and Loki saw an otter sitting on a stone above the river with a fresh-caught salmon. He threw a stone and hit the otter on the head, killing it. Then Loki took the otter and the salmon and bragged about having secured two beasts with one stone, and the gods went on their way.

At evening they came to a house, and a man opened the door to them and asked what they wanted. They asked for lodging, said they already had food, and showed the otter and the salmon to the householder, who named himself Hreidmar. He looked thoughtfully at them, but then he bade them welcome and told them to come in, take off their shoes, lay down their burdens and be at ease. So Loki put aside the shoes that let him run at great speed over land and air and water, and Odin laid down the spear that never missed its throw, and Hreidmar went away with the otter and the salmon, telling the gods he’d see their food prepared.

But once he was out of their sight Hreidmar called his sons Fafnir and Regin to him, and he showed them the dead otter. They knew it on sight, as their father had—knew it for their brother, who had inherited Hreidmar’s skill as a sorcerer, and who often spent his days in an otter’s shape. The three men agreed that they must have payment or revenge. Then they went back out to their guests, who sat at ease and off guard, and the sons held knives at their throats while Hreidmar bound them fast. Once he was quite sure that they could not move or escape, Hreidmar told the gods that they had killed his son, and they would pay for it one way or another.

Bound in Geirröth’s hall, Odin had called on his divine power and saved himself. But perhaps Hreidmar’s enchantments stopped him, from doing this, or perhaps he regretted the death of Hreidmar’s son and wished to make it good. In any case, the gods swore to ransom their lives with as much money as the bereaved father might demand. He went away then, flayed the skin from the dead otter, and told them to both fill and cover that skin with gold. Loki swore a binding oath that if they let him go, he would fetch gold and bring it back, rather than fleeing. Hreidmar also kept Loki’s shoes, as an added incentive for his return.

Loki did not go back to Asgard to get payment. Instead, he went to another pool in the stream: he had heard that a dwarf named Andvari, who was wonderfully wealthy, lived by the river and often swam there in the form of a pike. Loki found and caught the great fish and told it forthwith to give over all its gold or die and go straight to the cold hall ruled by Hel. And the fish took a dwarf’s shape again and led

Loki into his treasury. There he handed over all the gold he had, except for one small ring which he tried to hide in his hand. Loki saw what he did and demanded the ring as well. Andvari pled with Loki, saying that if only he could keep that ring, his wealth would grow again. All the more reason, Loki said, why he must give the ring up. Andvari complied, but he cursed the ring as he handed it over, saying that it would bring evil to everyone who possessed it. Loki expressed himself satisfied with that, and said he'd be sure to give the word of the curse, along with the ring, to the one who would receive the treasure; he seems not to have reflected that the curse would touch him also.

Loki hurried back to Odin and showed him the treasure—the heap of gold, and also the small ring. Odin found the ring beautiful and decided to keep it for himself. Loki, so far as the stories tell us, did not see fit to mention the curse to Odin. Then they called Hreidmar and showed him the rest of the gold. Hreidmar poured gold into the otter pelt until it had almost the shape of his son again and stood on its feet; then he heaped the rest of the gold over it. The gods said the otter-skin was filled and covered with gold, and their bargain kept, but Hreidmar, peering closely at the treasure-mound, found a hair sticking out of it and said they were still his prisoners until that hair was covered. Odin handed the ring over with great reluctance. Then Hreidmar acknowledged that the ransom was paid, and he let his guests go free and gave Odin his spear and Loki his shoes. But Loki, once he was shod, laughed at Hreidmar and told him that his treasure was bound by a dreadful curse that would destroy him and his remaining sons.

Hreidmar looked darkly at his former prisoners and said that if he had realized that they would pay their debt with such malice, he would have killed them and refused the blood-price. Loki, no longer laughing, said that the curse would spread far beyond Hreidmar's sons and bring despair and death to many heroes. Hreidmar replied stoutly that for his part he intended to enjoy the gold in peace for the rest of his life, that their threats moved him not at all, and that they had better take their leave. This they did.

No one now remembers whether Hreidmar concealed his fear of the curse in his anger and pride, or whether the beauty of the ring and the lust for gold had driven everything else from his mind. But as he stood fingering the gold, Regin and Fafnir demanded their share of the blood-price for their brother. Hreidmar refused them flatly, and they did not dare to press the point. For Hreidmar was a skilled sorcerer, and also a skilled swordsman, and besides that, he had an enchanted helmet which struck sick fear into the hearts of all those who looked on it; he was not a safe man to cross. So Fafnir and Regin went away

silently, but once they were out of their father's earshot they murmured to each other that the old man was unjust, that Ótr had been their brother as well as their father's son, that the gold was rich and beautiful, and the ring fairest of all, and surely their father was a greedy fool to seek to keep all that for himself... They drove each other into ever greater anger and greed, and at last, they resolved to take the gold by force. Not in an open fight, for they doubted their chances there. But at night, when Hreidmar's fear-helm and his sword were set aside, and he lay dreaming—of his dead son? Of his new wealth? —Fafnir crept to his bedside and stabbed him, and then hurried to gather the gold for himself.

Hreidmar, dying, cried out for his daughter Lyngheith, and she came to him and wept for him; but when he urged her to avenge him, she said it was not a sister's place to attack her brother. Hreidmar looked grimly on her, and said at last, "If not you, then your son, when you have a son; or his son after him..." and he died in his anger and his pain, wishing a curse on his descendants with his last breath.

Regin, meanwhile, had gone to the golden hoard, but he found Fafnir there before him with their father's fear-helm on his head and their father's sword in his hand. When Regin reminded him of their words about brotherhood and justice and asked for his share of the treasure, Fafnir laughed coldly and said that since he'd killed his own father for the treasure, he was not likely to give any of it away to his brother, or to spare that brother's life if the brother was fool enough to persist in demanding what he was too weak to win.

Regin was afraid of his brother, and he left the treasure behind, though the longing for it was a heaviness in his body and a sickness in his mind. He went to his sister Lyngheith and asked her how he could get the treasure away from Fafnir. She was no more eager to plot vengeance with him than with Hreidmar; she told him he could ask for his share of the inheritance in peaceable and brotherly terms, or he could go away and leave it, for there must be no more murdering of kin over that gold.

Regin left that place, though he did not leave off brooding over the treasure. But Fafnir carried the gold away to the heath of Gnitta, and there he spread it out in a gleaming bed, set his father's fear-helm on his head, and took on himself the shape of a dragon. Fafnir the dragon was gleaming as gold and deadly as the curse that lay on the hoard, and the fear of him spread far and wide. Regin feared him too, and knew he could never beat him in strength, but Regin was a patient and a crafty man, and he consoled himself with the thought that he might be able to manipulate another man into seeking both vengeance and treasure on his behalf. We shall see what that attempt got him in the tale that follows.

Notes:

This part of the tale of the Ring of the Niflungs is told in Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* , and also in the Poetic Edda *Reginismol* .

Chapter 11—Regin and Sigurd

Regin traveled to what he hoped was a safe distance from his father's cursed and empty house and from the wild moor where Fafnir crouched in dragon-form on the cursed gold. Regin entered the court of King Alf. He was welcomed there, for he was a wise man and also a skilled smith. He gained much honor, so much that in time he was made foster-father to the King's stepson Sigurd. For King Alf had taken to wife a wise and beautiful woman who came to him with two dowries besides her beauty and her wisdom: a great hoard of treasure and a son, both gifts from her dead husband Sigmund.

Something of Sigmund's story must be told here if we are to understand Sigurd's life. Sigmund came from a line of mighty men; some stories say that the Volsungs, his father's people, were descended in a long line from Odin himself. Certainly, all that race were proud and brave and strong, but they were seldom happy. Sigmund's life had been a bitter one. As a boy, he saw his father and brothers killed by his stepbrother, and he himself was tortured and would have died if his sister had not rescued him. He lived long in hiding and at last avenged the deaths of his relatives, but his sister chose to stay and die with her husband, and he left that place in loneliness and sorrow. His firstborn son died of courage and pride, and his first wife died also. But in his old age Sigmund heard of the loveliness and wisdom of Hjordis, the daughter of King Eylimi. Sigmund traveled to Eylimi's court, and when he saw Hjordis joy came upon him and renewed him almost as Iduna's apples had renewed the gods when they grew old. He desperately wanted her for his wife. But he was not her only suitor. Young King Lyngi, the lord of a great realm, also came courting Hjordis, and his will was set on her just as strongly as Sigmund's.

King Eylimi was troubled and did not know how to answer the suitors for his daughter's hand. He thought that a refusal would enrage either of them, and he didn't know which would make the worse enemy; Lyngi commanded the greater army, but Sigmund was a legendary fighter and known to be a bad enemy—and then, there were the rumors of divine parentage, and it was foolish to oppose a man favored by the gods; although the gods had not seen fit to intervene and save Sigmund's father's life, Sigmund's father's enemy was dead and defeated...

He called Hjordis to him and laid out the choice before her, praising her wisdom and telling her to set her own course without interference from him. Hjordis considered the matter gravely, owning that it was grave and troubling, but in the end, she chose Sigmund for his fame and his deeds of courage. Sigmund was delighted by her choice, and he and Eylimi feasted together, and each day was finer and more

glorious than the one before, but Lyngi went home in high rage.

King Sigmund and his bride returned to Sigmund's own country, and soon after they reached home Lyngi their land invaded in force. His army vastly outnumbered Sigmund's, but he sent messengers ahead to say that they had heard of Sigmund's courage and surely he would not now slink away and hide... Sigmund, who valued his reputation more than his life, called his army forth, but he sent Hjordis and his treasure to a hiding place deep in the woods.

When battle was joined, Sigmund fought with the strength of a young man and the skill worked into his bones by long years of fighting, and his army did wonders as they followed him. But in a lull in the fighting an old man approached Sigmund, a one-eyed old man wearing a cloak and a slouched hat and carrying a staff with which he struck at Sigmund. Sigmund returned the stroke with his sword, but the sword shattered in his hand in the sight of both armies. Then fear struck the hearts of Sigmund's army, and Sigmund knew that his good fortune had departed from him. For he recognized the one-eyed man as Odin, who now fought against and not with the man who might have been his descendant. Sigmund's army was destroyed, and Lyngi swept on to the castle in triumph, meaning to seize Hjordis and the treasury; but he found both gone.

Meanwhile, Hjordis crept to the battlefield by night, and she came on Sigmund, terribly wounded but not dead, and began to feel over him and see if she could staunch his wounds and heal him. But Sigmund told her that Odin now fought against him, and he had no more wish to live. He told his wife to guard the three things he had to leave her, his kingdom being conquered: the hidden gold, and the shards of his sword, and the son in her womb, who would one day be greater than ever his father had been.

Hjordis sat by her husband through the night. But as the first light dawned Sigmund's soul left him—and like as not, given his courage, the Valkyries took his soul to Odin's hall, though it is hard to imagine what Sigmund might have said to his great ancestor at their first meeting in that world. And Hjordis lifted up her eyes and saw a fleet of ships coming toward her with the sunlight in their sails. Those ships belonged to the prince Alf, son of King Hjalprek. He gazed with horror on the dead. Then Hjordis told him all that had happened, and when she saw that he was a thoughtful man who honored her for her wisdom she gave herself, her treasure and her son into his keeping.

They sailed back to Hjalprek's kingdom, and as soon as Hjordis' son was born, he was brought before Hjalprek, who admired his sharp eyes and prophesied great things for him. Then Hjordis married Alf, and both she and her son were held in high honor at the court, and Regin was chosen to be the boy's foster-father.

Regin was a clever man and a skilled instructor. He taught Sigurd to play chess, and to speak in the many languages of men, and to understand some of the secret runes. Sigurd was a quick pupil, strong in body and in mind, afraid of nothing, and in all ways his father's son. He listened avidly to all that Regin told him. But when Regin began to ask him whether he had control over the wealth that had been his father's, Sigurd answered blithely that King Alf kept it for him, and no doubt kept it better than Sigurd himself could do, he still being a child.

Regin, however, kept at it. He asked if Sigurd really trusted them to give him what was his when he was of age, and observed that so far they hadn't even given him a horse. This was because Sigurd was still young, but like most boys, he fancied himself old enough for anything, and straightaway went to ask for a horse.

As Sigurd expected, King Alf told him he could choose his own horse and anything else his heart desired. But Sigurd wanted nothing but the horse, though he was a little uncertain about how to choose the best one. He didn't ask Regin for advice. Perhaps Regin's words questioning the regard in which King Alf held him had left the boy a little doubtful of how much his foster-father respected him. In any case, he went out alone, and on his way, he met an old bearded man who asked him where he was going. Sigurd explained his errand and his doubts, and the old man offered to help him. Coming to where the herd grazed, the stranger proposed driving them all into the wild river. All of the horses reared up in fear and would not enter the churning race—all but one, a young grey stallion never ridden before, who plunged in without fear. Sigurd, wide-eyed, chose that one. The old man said it was a good choice, for that horse was descended from Odin's horse Sleipnir, and there was no better mount in all the mortal lands.

Sigurd named the horse Grani and made much of him, and he didn't notice when the old man left. He went back to his foster-father and said happily that he'd been given his choice and he now had the very best horse in all the world.

"So you have a horse," Regin said. "So do most men who aren't the sons of kings. Well, I don't think you'll ever be given your father's treasure. But I know where there is treasure for the winning, and honor too."

Sigurd shook his head at Regin's gloomy prediction about his father's treasure, but he leaned forward eagerly when Regin spoke of new treasure and adventure. "Where?" he asked.

Regin told him that he spoke of the gold piled at Gnitta-heath under the watchful eye of Fafnir the dragon. At that Sigurd stared wide-eyed.

He was only a boy, but he'd heard of that dragon, vast as a mountain, swift as the north wind, burning like the furnace of Muspelheim, so fierce and terrible that no king or hero had ever dared to go against him. If that was what Regin meant, Sigurd thought his chances at getting anything but a quick death there were very slight.

Regin shook his head then, saying that the Volsungs were reputed to be fearless, but either the stories had always been exaggerated or the line was decaying. Sigurd said angrily that he didn't claim to be the man his father had been, but Regin had no business calling him a coward because he, as a half-grown boy, didn't immediately ride out against a terrible dragon. And why, he demanded, was Regin so eager for him to take on such a desperate quest ?

Regin, as always, was ready with a story. He told how the gods had killed his brother and had paid his brother's ransom with cursed treasure, and how Fafnir had killed Hreidmar for the gold and kept it all for himself. He told the tale as though he had never egged Fafnir on to do murder, and Sigurd believed what he was told. He cried out in grief for what Regin had lost, and he said that he would avenge that loss if he could, but for that, he would need a good weapon. This Regin promised to make.

He made a sword, well-balanced and coldly beautiful, and offered it to Sigurd; but Sigurd broke it over his knee and said such a sword would never serve him against Fafnir. Regin was not pleased with this, but he made another blade. Sigurd broke this as well. And now for the first time he spoke to Regin with the same cold scorn Regin had used on him before, asking whether Regin's skill at smithying was greatly overrated, or whether he was a betrayer and a deceiver like all his kin. Then he flung away from his stepfather's anger and went to his mother Hjordis. They talked and drank together, and at last, he asked her for the pieces of his father's sword Gram which she had treasured all that time. She gave them to him and said they would serve him well as he went on to great fame, and Sigurd took them to Regin and bade him re-forge them. Regin looked coldly on his foster-son, who seemed to be interfering considerably in an art not his own, but he agreed to re-forge the sword, and when he lifted it new-made it seemed to him that fire ran along the blade. Then he told Sigurd that he had done all that he could.

Sigurd swung the blade at the anvil. It sheared the anvil through, and when Sigurd examined the blade, there was no mark on it. He ran with the sword to the stream by the smithy, and there he saw a tuft of wool floating down the river. He set the blade downstream from the wool and edge-on, and it sliced neatly through the tuft. Then he returned to Regin with a glad heart, thanked him and praised his smithcraft.

“My word is made good, then,” Regin said. “What of yours?”

But Sigurd had begun to be thoughtful as well as bold, and he told Regin that it seemed both greedy and dishonorable for him to go out against a dragon to win treasure when the man who had killed his father and driven his mother from home still enjoyed his ill-gotten gains. The first work for his skill and his sword, he said, should be to avenge that death. He spoke proudly and angrily, his hand on the hilt of the wonder-sword Regin had reforged, and Regin was not minded to argue with him.

Sigurd went then to his mother and his stepfather and asked for their permission to go out against King Lyngi, and they gave him all the ships and men he needed, and he set sail for his father’s country which he had never seen. For the first few days, the wind grew fair and all hearts were high. Then the clouds clotted overhead, and the tossing waves were darkened, and the sun shone low and red so the sea seemed turned to blood. Some men of the army said this was an ill omen and would have turned back, but Sigurd would not be turned. He did stop long enough to rescue a man who seemed to be stranded on a rocky isle in the wild sea, and when that man came on the ship the clouds parted, the sun shone on the waves, and a favorable wind drove the ships toward Lyngi’s land. Sigurd asked the stranger for advice on the conduct of battles, and he got all he could well listen to or remember, but when the coastline came in sight the wind faded and the stranger was nowhere to be seen.

Sigurd and his host came ashore, and they burned and ruined all that they found—Sigurd seems to have seen himself as avenger only, not a liberator, and indeed while the Volsungs were known for brave and true men they were not called men of mercy. Some refugees escaped with their lives, fled to King Lyngi and told him that the Volsungs were not all dead after all, that a terrible army had landed, led by a ferocious warrior whom no man could oppose, a man very like to the dead Sigmund.

Lyngi said he would destroy the son as he destroyed the father, and he mustered a great host and went out to meet Sigurd’s army. The battle that followed was long and bitter, with no quarter given on either side. When the sun set blood-red that evening Lyngi and his kinsmen and captains lay dead, and Sigurd had the victory, but it was with a far smaller host that Sigurd sailed for home.

King Alf didn’t hold that against him; he held that Sigurd had come back rich in honor as well as treasure, and he feasted him and made much of him. Regin saw that the distrust he had hoped to sow between King Alf and Sigurd had come to nothing, and there was bitterness in his heart. But he smoothed this over as well as he might, and urged Sigurd, now that he had avenged his father, to keep his

word given to Regin and ride out against the Dragon.

Notes:

This story and the four that follow are all based largely on the thirteenth-century prose manuscript called the *Volsungasaga*. There are many alternate versions of the story of Sigurd. Snorri Sturluson gives a brief summary of it in the *Skáldskaparmál* . Many of the Poetic Eddas tell fragments of the story, often in ways that contradict each other.

Chapter 12—Sigurd and the Dragon

Sigurd accepted Regin's challenge. He might have felt less affection for his foster-father than he had in old times, but he still respected Regin's wisdom and wanted his good opinion; also he had the high-hearted pride of his family, and he could not bear that any man should call him a coward. So he took his leave of King Alf's court, whistled for his good horse Grani, and rode for Gnitta-heath with Regin at his side.

On the way, Regin assured him that his chances against the dragon were excellent, and that report had exaggerated the size and the terror of Fafnir, who was not so much larger or fiercer than the common run of dragons. Sigurd heard this with an open mind as they rode through fields and forests. But when they came out on the bare heath of Gnitta it was another matter. Sigurd looked about him at the waste of scorched earth and blasted stone. No green thing grew there, but the dead land was scored with tracks which had been worn by Fafnir dragging his great length along from his lair to the watering-place. "No larger than the common run?" he said, staring. "The dragon who left these tracks?" And, seeing that the reports of Fafnir's great size were true, it occurred to him that the stories of the fear-helm might also be true—that he who had braved the sea-storm and the fury of battle might be unable to stand and face Fafnir.

Regin assured Sigurd that he didn't need to face the dragon; that it would be far simpler and more effective to dig himself a hole in one of the beast's customary tracks and stab it from below as it crawled over him. Sigurd seems to have been a bit more willing than his father to consider practicality as well as honor. He didn't insist on challenging the dragon openly. He did, however, have a more pragmatic concern: what would happen to him when he found himself in a pit full of dragon blood?

Regin had foreseen this danger, though he had hoped very much that Sigurd would not. He said angrily that Sigurd obviously was entirely without the courage of his ancestors, and that there was no use in giving wise counsel to such a coward. Then he set his heels to his horse and rode away as fast as he could—"sore afeared," the story says, though whether he feared Sigurd or Fafnir more in that moment was not specified. But Sigurd set his teeth, rode to the edge of the dragon-slot, leaped down from his horse and set himself to digging a pit as Regin had advised.

While he worked, a bearded old man came up beside him. Sigurd was too occupied with digging, and with keeping his fear at bay, to wonder much what an elderly wanderer might be doing in that bleak and dangerous country by himself. But when the old man asked what

he was doing, Sigurd explained accurately and courteously. In return, the old man called him ill-advised and suggested that he dig a network of pits and tunnels through which the blood could drain away. Sigurd did not take offense and did take the old man's advice. He resumed digging at a furious pace and didn't notice when the old man left.

At first, Sigurd thought, to his shame, that he was shaking. Surely not from fear—not he, King Sigmund's son! He must just be worn out with digging pit after pit... Then, as pebbles rolled down the sides of his latest excavation and bounced at the bottom, he realized that the earth itself was shaking. Fafnir was coming. He threw the shovel aside, crouched in a hole right under the center of the dragon-track, and drew his sword.

The earth-tremor intensified. The light failed as Fafnir's smoky breath shadowed the sky. A horrible stench, foul as shame and sharp as fear, gagged Sigurd. Runnels of some foul liquid—thin and stinking, not thick and dark; dragon-venom, this, not dragon's blood—trickled down the sides of the pit, eddied and boiled at its base. But Sigurd had inherited from his father Sigmund, and maybe from their father Odin, skin impervious to poison. He breathed quick and short, trying not to take the tainted air too deeply into his lungs.

Then he heard the dragon breathing above him, a whining, rasping sound that sawed at his nerves, that drew across his mind the shadow of every hurt and every taunt he had ever suffered. He gritted his teeth and gripped his sword-hilt. The dragon's head passed over him, and the heat of the dragon's body beat down on him as it dragged itself by. He knew by a change in its level when the dragon's left leg passed over him, and he drove the sword upward into the dragon's left arm-pit with all the force of his anger and his fear. The sword sank into the hilt, and then it was torn from Sigurd's hands as the dragon arched away from him. Angry, and coiling for a strike? Sigurd didn't know. He leaped from the pit as the dragon's black and boiling blood poured into it and on into the network of other holes the old man had suggested; gasping in the foul air, he made himself leap toward the dragon not away from it and seize the hilt of his sword.

The sword came free, followed by a gush of boiling blood that singed Sigurd's arm to the shoulder. He sprang back as the dragon thrashed again. Not hunting him; he had struck too deep and true for that, and Fafnir was convulsing in his death-pangs. Even so the rocks fell in sparks as he struck them, and Sigurd made haste to stand clear.

After a while, the dragon lay more nearly still, and it gazed at Sigurd from one great fading eye. "Who are you? From what family? Who dared to bring weapons against me?" Fafnir asked.

Sigurd remembered Regin's tale, and how this was no mere beast but a black magician who might still have a powerful curse to cast. So he told the dragon that he was nameless and no man's son. The dragon gave a hiss of scorn, oddly reminiscent of his human brother Regin's, and said that a human born of no man was quite a new wonder in the world. He added that brave as his slayer might seem, plainly he was too afraid to venture the truth.

Thus goaded, Sigurd gave his name and his parentage; and Fafnir, dying, laughed at him, and mocked him for being far from his home and kin, a dependent in another man's court, practically a slave.

Sigurd answered with cold contempt in his voice that while he might be a bondsman he had never been chained, and surely Fafnir had found him free enough.

Fafnir said that there was no need to take offense and added that he had a good warning which Sigurd should heed: the gold for which he had killed would be the death of him if he were fool enough to take it. Sigurd rejoined that he was going to die someday anyway, and while they lived all men wanted gold. Fafnir turned his talk aside then, speaking of the gods and the fates so that Sigurd saw he had wisdom, not unlike his brother's. Then his voice grew fainter, and he murmured wonderingly that until Sigurd, no man had dared to ride against him, no one had been willing to challenge either his strength or the spell of the fear-helm. Sigurd shrugged and said the strongest man would someday meet his overmatch.

Fafnir felt death pressing on him, and he spoke to Sigurd once more, urging him to hurry away before the curse took him. Sigurd refused this counsel, and Fafnir laughed his last, saying "Regin, my brother, has caused my death, and it gladdens my heart to know he will cause yours as well. And you will have gold enough for all the days of your life, and it will bring death to you and to all who claim it after you." Then the fire of his eyes faded, and the rattle of his breath was still, and the smoke of his breathing dispersed on the clean wind.

Seeing the clearing sky and hearing the silence, Regin strode back across the withered heath toward Sigurd. He stood still for a long time, staring at his dead brother and his grim-faced foster-son. "My brother is dead," he said at last, slowly and heavily, "and I can hardly say that I am blameless."

At this Sigurd was angry and thought Regin was trying to take credit for a deed in which he had not helped; he answered hotly that he had awaited Fafnir's coming alone while Regin crawled off and hid. Regin pointed out that Sigurd had slain the dragon with the sword Regin forged. Sigurd retorted that courage mattered more than weaponry.

Regin gave over arguing then, still looking on the corpse; he said

again, heavily, "You have killed my brother, and I will not be held blameless." Then he seemed to shake the heaviness off. He told Sigurd to cut out the dragon's heart, build a fire, roast it, and call Regin when it was ready to eat. Then Regin drank dragon's blood from his cupped hands, went a little way off and lay down to sleep and forget his guilt and his scheming for a while .

Sigurd walked from the barren ground to a thicket, broke branches and started a fire. When blood began to bubble from the dragon's heart, Sigurd put a finger to it, then put the finger in his mouth, to see whether it was time to call Regin yet. But when the blood touched his tongue it seemed that understanding came into his mind. Birds sang in the shrubbery; he had scarcely noticed them before, but now he understood their language, and he found that they were speaking of him. They said he was cooking for another the thing he should eat himself in order to gain wisdom. They said that Regin was preparing to betray him. They said, moreover, that if Sigurd was wise, he would kill Regin as he slept before Regin could kill him in vengeance for Fafnir; thus he would win safety, and wisdom, and also all the gold would be his. And once he had done that, they said, a woman wise and brave and beautiful would be his for the taking.

Were those the true voices of the birds, or had Fafnir's dying spite put into Sigurd's ears the counsel that would lead to Sigurd's doom? Sigurd did not think to wonder at this. He did as the birds had told him. He ate of the dragon's heart. He killed his sleeping foster-father. He rode to the dragon's lair, piled the gold of the hoard on Grani, sprang on Grani's back himself and rode away alone.

Notes:

This portion of Sigurd's story is taken from the *Volsungasaga* and also from the Poetic Eddas *Fafnirsmol* and *Reginismol* .

Chapter 13—The Marriage of Sigurd

Sigurd did not ride back to King Alf and his mother. Perhaps he didn't wish to have to answer questions about the King's smith Regin who had ridden away with him. Perhaps the words of the birds, the words the dragon's blood had let him hear, drove all other thoughts out of his mind. They had spoken riddlingly of a woman to be won on the mountain called the Hindfell, so he turned his horses' head that way.

As he climbed the slope, he saw on the high fell a great light, a fire leaping and burning. He wondered if another of Fafnir's kin lived there. He rode his horse straight at the flames, and it must be that Grani really had god's blood in him as Odin had said, for he leaped through the flames—which proved to be no more than a narrow wall encircling a courtyard and a high castle hung with shields. Sigurd rode warily up toward the door, seeing no signs of dragon-blasting or dragon-slots. He sprang down from his horse and called out for the people of the castle, but none answered. Greatly wondering, he walked in alone, and it seemed to him that his footsteps echoed strangely.

Then he forgot that, seeing that after all, he was not alone in the castle. A woman lay stretched out on a bench. She bore a sword, and she wore armor that fit her close as cloth, but she did not stir at Sigurd's approach. First, he thought she was dead. Then, leaning close, he saw that she breathed. He cut her armor away, as he might have done for a comrade gravely wounded and in need of tending; and when the last piece of it fell away, she opened her eyes, looked gravely on him and asked who had broken her sleep and ended the curse on her.

Sigurd gave his name and his parentage, and asked her for her own, saying that he had heard rumors of her wisdom and nobility. She did not answer him straightaway. She rose, looked about her, and strode out from the dark hall into the sunlight; then she sang in praise of the light and the beauty of the world, and of the gods who had given shape to all that glory. Then, looking back to the man who had awakened her, she expressed herself satisfied with his lineage and began to explain her own.

She named herself Brynhild, a king's daughter, as Sigurd had heard, and also a Valkyrie, which was more than he had guessed. As we have seen before, the Valkyries chose the bravest of the dead to carry to Odin and Friggin Asgard. But they had a choice in another matter as well—in who would survive a battle and who would be slain. For the most part they served Odin and chose whom he ordained. But when Odin sent Brynhild into a fight with instructions to see that one man died and came to him while the other had the victory, Brynhild looked

thoughtfully on the combatants and thought she had a better idea. She killed the champion to whom Odin had promised victory and spared the other man.

Odin was furious at Brynhild's rebellion. He told her that she would never be a shieldmaiden again, but instead would become a wife—clearly in his mind, this was a severe punishment. Brynhild retorted that she had vowed that she would never marry a man who had known fear. Odin made no quarrel with that—the gods themselves dared not break their vows, and surely a Valkyrie could not be expected to. So he set her in an enchanted sleep and laid her inside the wall of fire, where only a stouthearted man would venture to find her.

Sigurd looked at Brynhild with wonder and asked her to teach him wisdom. She told him she knew runes of power to help him in all manner of matters. Sword-runes gave strength in battle, ship-runes could bring a vessel safe home out of the most terrible storm. Word-runes could avert wrath and harshness in judgment. Ale-runes nullified poisons and potions of bewilderment that might be mixed into drinks by enemies. Thought-runes deepened the runemaster's wisdom, and branch-runes or life-runes healed the sick. All these, she said, she would teach him, if he would swear to be loyal to her. But by swearing that, she said, looking him hard in the eyes, he would bind himself to many dangers; loyalty would be a hard path, and betrayal would be horribly avenged.

Sigurd answered that he feared nothing, that he desired both her and her wisdom, and that he would love and serve her and learn all she could teach him.

She took up teaching in earnest then-- the secret lore of the runes, and also some plain advice. She enjoined him not to harm his kin, even if they harmed him, as such forbearance would be rewarded after his death if not in his life; never to swear an oath he was not sure of keeping; to reverently bury the dead, friend, foes or strangers; and not to quarrel with fools in the public assembly (and, if one of them insisted on picking a fight, to keep silent at the time and kill him later.) She added warnings against accepting the hospitality of witches (though she didn't explain how to recognize them), kissing beautiful women, lying to and with women in lust, trusting the kinsmen of people he'd killed (even if they agreed to accept a blood-price), staying home from battles out of fear (which, she said, was likely to get the prudent one killed very unpleasantly inside a burning house,) and betraying friends—and, most of all, against betraying his wife.

All those rules, Sigurd said, he meant to keep, and as to wives, he knew none whom he would rather have than Brynhild, the wisest being he had ever met.

Brynhild smiled at him then, and she told him she would sooner wed him than any man living. They drank ale together and swore oaths of love and faithfulness, and both meant on that day to keep their words forever and have joy of each other all the days of their lives. Then Sigurd rode away, promising to return soon and marry her. For the birds who sang to him after Fafnir's death had mentioned great things awaiting him not only the Hindfell but also in the castle of King Giuki. Having found the first gift so good, he was eager for the second, and he rode away with a light heart.

He came first to the castle of King Heimir, the foster-father of Brynhild. Sigurd was made welcome there, and he lingered happily—until, out hawking one day, he came on Brynhild where she sat in a tower, weaving in gold the story of his slaying of Fafnir and Regin, and his love came on him again in full force. He told Heimir how it was with him, and Heimir said that for his own part he would be glad to have Sigurd for a foster-son, but he doubted that Brynhild would accept to marry any man. Sigurd went back to her and asked if she hadn't meant the oaths she swore him.

Brynhild looked sadly at him then, and she said that she would keep her oath, but she believed he would break his, bringing ruin on them both. But Sigurd swore newer and greater oaths of faithfulness. And to seal them all, he gave her the fairest thing he had found in Fafnir's hoard: Andvari's ring, the ring that bore the curse. They lay together then and had great joy of each other. But Sigurd was not minded to settle down with a wife just yet, and he rode on to Giuki's kingdom.

There again he was welcomed and honored by Giuki, and by Giuki's sons Gunnar, Hogni and Guttorm, and most of all by Giuki's daughter Gudrun, who loved Sigurd as fiercely and suddenly as Frey had loved Gerd the giantess. Gudrun's mother Grimhild saw her daughter's love, and she also heard how often and how lovingly Sigurd spoke of Brynhild. To an ordinary woman, Gudrun's case might have seemed hopeless, but Grimhild was something more than an ordinary woman. She mixed a potion and set it in Sigurd's drinking-horn; and Sigurd, thinking himself safe among friends, neglected to use the ale-runes to safeguard his cup. As soon as he drank that draught, the memory of Brynhild faded from his mind. Soon after that Gudrun came to him with more ale, and he saw that she was beautiful and proud, and her image lingered in his mind in place of the one he had forgotten. So when Giuki offered him a son's share in the kingdom, and Gudrun's hand in marriage, Sigurd accepted with joy. The wedding-feast was full of drink and music and dancing, and there was great delight in the hearts of Sigurd, and of Gudrun, and of all Giuki's court.

Sigurd went forth to war beside Giuki and his sons, and wherever Sigurd fought, he had the victory so that his fame spread through all

the lands around. Returning home, he gave some of the dragon's heart to Gudrun to eat, and she grew wiser and higher-hearted even than she had been before. She and her husband lived together in joy, and when their son Sigmund was born, they thought they had all the goodness that life could offer.

Notes:

Most of the narrative here is based on the *Volsungasaga*. Brynhild's counsel to Sigurd at their first meeting is given differently, and in different order, in the *Volsungasaga* and in the Poetic Edda *Sigrdrifumol*, the Ballad of the Victory-Bringer. There are conflicting accounts of whether Sigurd gave Andvari's ring to Brynhild, and got her with child, at their first or their second meeting.

Chapter 14—Brynhild's Betrayal

There was only one thing lacking in the happiness of King Giuki's household. They had success and honor and wealth, and Gunnar and Sigurd had love and happiness, but Giuki's son Gunnar was still unwed. Grimhild took this to heart, and she went to her son and told him to seek the bravest and noblest maiden in all the lands—and that, she said, was Brynhild. Sigurd, she added, would surely stand his friend in that courtship.

The stories don't tell us what was in Grimhild's heart when she said this. Had she fallen into her own spell and forgotten Sigurd's love for Brynhild? Did she want to taunt Brynhild? Was she seeking to destroy them all? No one else in the court had reason to wonder. Gunnar and Sigurd rode blithely together back to Heimir's kingdom to seek Brynhild's hand.

Heimir received them courteously and told them what he had told Sigurd before: Brynhild was free to choose her own mate, if there was any man brave enough to satisfy her. He added that she had retired to her castle behind a ring of fire, and no man could reach her except by riding through it. So the two friends rode together up the Hindfell, and still no memory stirred in Sigurd's mind, not even when they came to the great blaze on the heath, the flames hissing and singeing and licking the sky. Gunnar swallowed hard and then drove his horse straight at the fire, but as often as he spurred the horse, it turned away. He does not seem to have fancied his chances of getting through on foot; instead, he asked Sigurd for his horse. Sigurd handed Grani over willingly, but Grani was less willing; he wouldn't budge under any rider but Sigurd.

Grimhild, it seems, had foreseen such a danger, and before the young men rode from her hall, she had taught them the trick of shape-changing. So Sigurd took on the face and form of Gunnar, and Gunnar the face and form of Sigurd, though each man's mind, memory and spirit remained his own. Grani recognized his master even in disguise and let Sigurd mount him and set his face to the flame. Then the fire roared higher and hotter, but Sigurd drove his horse straight at it, and just as they passed into the flame it sank to embers; the horse landed safe on the other side, and Sigurd, still in Gunnar's form, went into the hall which had been wiped from his mind by Grimhild's draft.

Brynhild, however, had not forgotten Sigurd. This time she sat waking in the hall, armored and armed, thinking of her long-departed lover. When she heard the ring of a horse's hooves on the flags of the courtyard and saw a man leap down, she thought it must be Sigurd come for her at last, and her heart sang. Then he drew closer, and she saw Gunnar's face. Wise as she was, she saw no deeper than the

semblance. And when the newcomer told her he had come to wed her, she turned sad eyes on him and said she didn't know what to answer him.

Her wooer promised Brynhild a rich dowry of gold, but this didn't move her. She told the man that she had no mind to hear his love-business unless he was the greatest and bravest of men, for she herself had done great and valiant deeds in war. Her wooer acknowledged her words but reminded her that she had sworn to give herself to the man who could ride through the fire. This she acknowledged to be true, and she gave herself to the man she knew as Gunnar for the oath's sake even though she thought he was not Sigurd whom she loved, yet she thought he must be a very valiant man to have ridden through that fire. So she rose and made him welcome, and they pledged troth to each other for the second time, though neither of them knew it; and again they lay in one bed together. But Sigurd set his sword between them, not meaning to be unfaithful to his marriage vows—the only vows that he remembered taking—or to cuckold his friend and brother Gunnar. For three nights they slept thus, and then Sigurd rode away from Brynhild once again. But before they parted she gave him the ring she had had from Sigurd, Andvari's ring that bore the curse, and he gave her another ring from Fafnir's hoard.

Sigurd, thinking nothing of the curse, went to Gunnar, and each man took his proper shape. Then the two men rode back to Giuki's kingdom together.

Brynhild rode to Heimir's house. Not quite alone; she brought with her a child, her daughter Aslaug, gotten on her by Sigurd before he rode away and forgot her. And she spoke bitterly to Heimir, saying that she had thought to seal herself away from all men but Sigurd, though she had not wished to publish the matter in those terms for shame. The terms of her oath had been met by another man to whom she was now pledged. Heimir told her that she was indeed pledged to Gunnar and must hold her course; but he kept Aslaug at his court, thinking both Brynhild and her husband would be happier without the constant reminder of Brynhild's first love. Then Brynhild rode alone to her new husband and her new life.

Gunnar, Giuki and Grimhild welcomed her with joy, and they made a great feast for her, and at that feast Gunnar and Brynhild were wed 'in great glee,' as the poets would have it. But as they drank toasts to their marriage the spell slipped from Sigurd, and he remembered all the things that had passed between him and Brynhild. Horror gripped his mind then, as he knew himself faithless to his oath; and perhaps he remembered Fafnir's warning and Fafnir's curse, and wondered if the fair blessings to which the birds had guided him were all they had appeared. But it was far too late to mend the matter, now that both he

and Brynhild were wed to others, so he resolved to hold his peace.

That resolve, it seems, he kept no better than his first promise to Brynhild. Indeed he said nothing to Brynhild, or to her new husband, but at some point, he did tell his wife Gudrun all the sorrow and the shame of it. And he gave Gudrun Andvari's ring, which he had neglected to hand over to Gunnar after Brynhild gave it to him .

A bitterness grew then in Gudrun's heart, as it had already grown in Brynhild's, and the sister queens looked strangely on each other. One day when they went to bathe, Brynhild insisted on washing her hair upstream from Gudrun; she said she was cleaner than Gudrun, and better in all things, having a nobler father and a higher-minded husband; for her Gunnar, she said, had lived as a king's son in his own land all his days and had dared the flames for her, while Gudrun's Sigurd had grown up as a bondsman in a stranger's court.

Gudrun flew into a fury then and said that Sigurd's deeds of courage could be matched by no man. Why, he had killed Fafnir, and what had Gunnar ever done to equal that? And besides, Sigurd had been Brynhild's first choice; only he loved Gudrun as he'd clearly never loved Brynhild. And as for the fire, well, Brynhild wasn't as wise as everyone called her if she didn't realize it was Sigurd who had ridden through that and come to Brynhild since Gunnar didn't have the courage for it.

Brynhild protested that she knew the man who had come to her through the flames, that she had lain with him there and then, and his body was the body of her husband Gunnar. "And his mind was the mind of Sigurd," Gudrun said; and to prove her words she drew out Andvari's ring and waved it before Brynhild so that the light flashed back from it. Then Gudrun laughed, but Brynhild turned corpse-pale and went home in silence, and she said no word all that long day. She had borne the loss of Sigurd bravely and silently, though not without bitterness; she had taught herself to live with being forsaken, but she would not bear being shamed.

Gudrun was not content to leave ill alone. The next day, when the men were gone out, and the sister queens sat together, Brynhild remained silent, and Gudrun asked what ailed her, and what man she would wish for her husband. Brynhild bade Gudrun mind her own business, but Gudrun wouldn't stop. At last Brynhild lost her temper and said that Gudrun would pay for having stolen Sigurd away from her.

Gudrun argued that she'd done no stealing, that she hadn't known anything about Brynhild when Sigurd asked for her hand, and her father had no cause to ask another woman's permission before marrying his daughter. Brynhild owned plainly that she'd bear no ill-

will if Gudrun had not gotten for herself the best man in the kingdom. Gudrun retorted that Brynhild had married better than she deserved, but her pride and anger would doubtless be the ruin of more people than Brynhild only. And now it was Brynhild who spoke slightly of Gunnar her husband, while Gudrun praised Gunnar her brother—though she did continue to mention that indeed her Sigurd was the best of men. Brynhild shook her head and said that she was most angry with Grimhild, who had drugged Sigurd into forgetting Brynhild and loving Gudrun. Gudrun denied that charge furiously, maintaining that her mother was a very honorable woman and that Sigurd had married Gudrun with open eyes and a clear mind. Whether she believed this, or whether her spite against Brynhild came from the certainty that Sigurd had loved Brynhild more truly, the story does not tell. However, it does say that Gudrun was stung to fury and said that at least no one could accuse her of having her wedding night before her wedding, whereas Brynhild's morals and her conduct wouldn't bear scrutiny.

Brynhild swallowed her rage, spoke soft words, said that her love now was given to Gunnar and that sister queens should not quarrel. But Gudrun did not trust her altogether; and in this, if in nothing else, Gudrun saw clearly.

Notes:

In this part of the story I've closely followed the *Volsungasaga*.

Chapter 15—The Death of Sigurd

After that quarrel Brynhild withdrew herself from Gudrun and all the court, and word flew to her husband Gunnar that she was sick and close to death. He hurried to her side and asked what was wrong and whether he could help. For a long time, she lay like a dead woman and would not answer, but as he kept pleading with her to speak some color came back into her cheeks and some fire into her eyes, and she answered him more clearly than he could bear.

She had never willed to be a wife at all, she told him, but had been forced to it; the one thing she had been permitted to do for herself was to insist on marrying only the bravest man in the world, and for that reason she had withdrawn to the castle within the ring of fire, thinking that only one man could cross it, and that man Sigurd. When she thought Gunnar had proved his courage by riding through to her she was willing to be wed to him, but now she learned that he was a coward and a deceiver who had blenched from the fire and sent another man in his stead; he had beguiled her, shamed her and made her break her oath, and for that she would be the death of him, and of his mother as well. Gunnar protested that his mother was well-loved and well-respected and had never killed anyone, whereas Brynhild was wild and full of hate. "But not full of deceit like your mother," Brynhild said, "and I tell you plainly, I will kill you." And so she would have done then and there if Gunnar's brother Hogni had not run into his help. Between them they subdued Brynhild and bound her. Hogni would have left her so, but Gunnar still loved her as much as he feared and resented her, and he said it grieved him to see her bound.

Brynhild was not softened. Free or bound, she said, she would never sit by his side in joy again, never feast with him, never play chess with him, never speak to him words of love or good advice, never again love or desire any man but Sigurd. And she cried and screamed her hate and her hopeless love so that the whole court was frightened by the sound. Then she grew cold and silent, and for seven days she would not eat or drink or speak to anyone. Gunnar came to her again and again, but she turned her face away. Finally, Gunnar went to Sigurd and asked him to speak to Brynhild. Sigurd, troubled, went first to his wife. Gudrun said that she grieved for Brynhild's grief, and maybe she did—for Brynhild, or for the grief she saw coming upon her husband and herself, who knows? She told him to offer Brynhild gold in payment for her injury and grief.

So Sigurd went. He found Brynhild sleeping again, as he had at their first meeting, and he lifted the blankets from her and told her to rise up and be glad as she had at that first awakening .

She rose up, but not with gladness, and asked him how he dared to come to her with feigned words of kindness, he who had betrayed her most grievously. Sigurd protested that he had meant no harm and had left her because he was enspelled, not because he was false-hearted; he hastened to add that her husband Gunnar was a good and brave and noble man; he also did as Gudrun had urged him and offered Brynhild all his wealth if she would live and forgive and love her husband. Brynhild said all she wanted from Sigurd was his heart's blood. He said he doubted she would long outlive him. She agreed to that but said she didn't care to live long since she loved him and he hated her.

That moved Sigurd more than her curses and threats had done. He told Brynhild that he did indeed love her, and always had except when the spell wiped her from his mind; that when he remembered her again he grieved that she was not his wife, but then it was too late. "You tell me this too late," Brynhild said. Perhaps not too late, Sigurd said; would she not lie with him?

At this Brynhild was furious again and said that she was not an adulteress. Sigurd offered in desperation to put Gudrun aside and marry Brynhild, but as he said that he swelled with grief so that his armor burst from him, and his face had the same corpse-color as Brynhild's. "I will not have you," Brynhild said, "or any other." And Sigurd went away in fear and sorrow.

Gunnar saw Sigurd's face and knew his errand had failed. He hurried back to Brynhild, who told him that Sigurd was going even then to laugh at her with Gudrun and that this must be the death of Brynhild, or of Gunnar, or of Sigurd. Preferably of Sigurd, she said, and she urged Gunnar to kill him.

First Gunnar resisted this suggestion: he had sworn oaths of friendship and brotherhood to Sigurd. But then he began to think what a fine thing it would be to have Brynhild's entire love, and also Sigurd's treasure, and also clear pre-eminence in the kingdom. So he went to his next brother Hogni and suggested that they might work together to kill Sigurd, which hardly seemed possible for either one of them alone.

Hogni wasn't having it. He pointed out the shame and the curse that such a killing would incur. He also had sworn oaths to Sigurd. Gunnar pointed out that their youngest brother Guttorm was not sworn to Sigurd, and perhaps they could get him to do the killing for them. Hogni held out for a while, but at last he gave way; they drugged Guttorm's food to make him bold and reckless, and they promised Guttorm treasure and honor and power, and at last he agreed to do as they asked.

In the dead of night, Guttorm crept into the room where Gudrun and Sigurd lay together. Twice he withdrew from the room in fear and shame, but the third time he thought of his brothers' promises, went in and stabbed Sigurd as he slept. Sigurd woke too late to save himself, but in time to slay his killer; he said bitterly than Guttorm's brothers would have cause to regret this murder, and then he died.

Gudrun wept aloud for Sigurd, while Brynhild laughed at her. But her laughter was the strained laughter of madness, and soon she turned to weeping. She told Gunnar and Hogni that they would get no lasting profit from the murder of their sworn brother, and the curse would bite them deep and quickly. The curse had her already, she said, and she had no more will to live now that Sigurd was dead. Gunnar pled with her, but she would not listen to him. She stabbed herself, and she was burned on Sigurd's funeral pyre. But Gudrun chose what might have been the harder part—to live, to grieve and to remember.

The curse did not die with Sigurd or Brynhild, or even with Gudrun; their children and too many others were caught up in the web of blood-feuds or in the longing for Andvari's treasure. There was some courage in those feuds, but little mercy and little joy. And no descendant of Sigurd, nor any other mortal, ever matched Sigurd for courage and strength.

Notes:

Once again, this story follows the *Volsungasaga* for the most part. But in this part of that manuscript when Brynhild is explaining her griefs to Gunnar she gives an explanation for why she has to marry that contradicts the earlier account—in this version it is her human father King Budli, not Odin the Allfather, who has forced her to become a wife instead of a shieldmaiden, and he is motivated by a desire to placate King Giuki and avoid a war, not by revenge for Brynhild's taking too much initiative in deciding whom to kill.

Parts of the death-stories here are told in various of the Poetic Eddas. Some of these are told from Gudrun's perspective and view Brynhild as an agent of evil; others seem to show some admiration for her grief and pride.

This story ends this book's treatment of Andvari's curse as it played out in the mortal world. The next tale will look at how the curse fell upon Asgard itself and brought grief and lasting loss to the gods.

Chapter 16--The Passing of Balder

While Hreidmar stood gloating over the gold and his sons watched him with murder in their hearts, Odin and Loki returned to Asgard. They brought no gold with them from Andvari's hoard, not even the beautiful ring Odin had thought to save for himself, but it may well be that Andvari's curse still followed them. There was a heaviness in Odin's heart even in his own bright hall. The one place where even he could find heart's ease for a time was in the castle of his best-loved son Balder, the peacemaker, the most beautiful of the gods. When Frey was love-struck he had seen light falling from his beloved Gerd on all the world, but all the gods could see the light that fell where Balder walked, and when they came to his dwelling they left their darkness behind; there was no quarreling there and no bitterness of heart.

But even on Balder, the shadow fell in time. He began to have frightful dreams, and dimly he foresaw his own death. He brought his trouble to his fellow gods, and they were troubled with and for him—Odin most of all. Odin took his horse Sleipnir and rode far from the worlds of gods and men to the borders of Niflhel, the cold land of the dead. There he enspelled a dead wise-woman to rise from her grave and answer his questions about Balder's dreams. She protested at being called across the long cold leagues to the edge of the living world, and she did not wish to answer him anything at all; but he pressed her, and she told him that a great feast was prepared in Hel, for they knew that Balder would come among them soon. He would have pressed her to tell more, much as it pained him, but she saw his distress and recognized him; and she, being of the race of the giants, had no wish to lend help to the gods. She added only that no other living being would get speech or wisdom from her until the day when the gods were destroyed—and that would be after Balder's death, and yet soon enough.

Odin returned to the gods in great distress, understanding that his son's death was a thing fated and not to be changed. Frigg was less resigned. She took her flight-feathers and traveled through the worlds taking oaths. Not the oaths of the gods—for she could not imagine that any of them would harm Balder; nor of mortal beings, for they are forever dying and being born and there would be no end of swearing them. No, she made fire and water, metal and stone, and every kind of tree and of poisonous plant to swear that nothing of its substance would ever do any harm to Balder the beloved. And all these things swore willingly, for Balder was beloved by all.

Frigg returned to the assembly of the gods and told them what she had done, and they rejoiced at it. Soon enough they decided to put it to the test, mildly at first and then more strenuously, and it seemed

that Frigg had indeed kept her son safe. The gods could throw stones or spears at Balder, or push him into fire or water, and he took no harm at all. Even fate, it seemed, could be bent by love. The gods rejoiced in that thought, and soon it became a much-anticipated part of their feasts to throw things at Balder and watch him remain unscathed.

But one day, when most of the gods were gathered, and Loki was out wandering, a strange woman came to the gathering of the gods, and she saw people hurling weapons at Balder and laughing. She knotted her brows in puzzlement and asked Frigg what the gods might be doing, and Frigg explained. The woman's eyes widened in wonder. "You really took oaths from everything in the world? There's nothing that can hurt him?"

"Everything that matters," Frigg said. "There's a little plant called mistletoe; it was too small to be a danger and too young for oath-taking." The woman nodded, and when Frigg looked around again, she was gone.

Once out of Frigg's sight the woman cast off the shape of her disguise and appeared truly as Loki himself. Loki hurried off into the woods west of Asgard. When he came back, he had a little dart in his hand, a dart made of mistletoe.

He had been speedy, and the gods were still hurling things at Balder when he returned to the gathering in his own shape—all the gods but one: the blind god Höder, one of Balder's brothers, sat apart from the others, looking and feeling left out. Loki asked what ailed him and why he didn't join in with the other gods. Höder answered that he could hardly join their game when he was blind and weaponless. But Loki urged him to 'honor Balder like the others' and promised to help. He put the mistletoe dart into Höder's hand and guided him through a couple of practice casts to give him a feel for the direction. Then Höder stood forth and threw the dart.

Loki was a good teacher. His aim was true. The dart pierced Balder's heart, and Balder fell dead before them all. Höder didn't realize anything was wrong until he heard his fellow gods cry out in grief and horror.

They wept aloud, goddesses and gods alike, and they could find no words for their grief, nor strength in their hands to lay hold on Balder's killer—who indeed fled as soon as his legs would bear him, weeping bitterly as the rest (though he might have been wiser to stay where he was, for Balder's castle was a place of sanctuary and none would kill there—none, that is, would kill willingly.) Most of the gods grieved for their beloved companion, but Odin also felt cold despair in his heart, believing that Balder's death marked the beginning of the

end, of the terrible fall of the gods and the destruction of the world. Frigg was not thinking of her world, but of her son, and when at last she regained the power of speech she begged that someone would ride to Niflhel and see if Balder's spirit could be ransomed from there. Hermód, Odin's son and Balder's brother, took that errand; he borrowed Sleipnir, Odin's horse who was also Loki's son, and rode hard for Niflhel.

The rest of the gods laid Balder's body out for his funeral. They set him in his great ship Hringhorni at the sea's edge, and Odin laid a gold ring on his breast—not Andvari's ring, but the ring given by Brok when he won the wager against Loki. Balder's wife Nanna died of grief as she looked at her dead husband, and they laid her body in the ship with him. Another of Odin's sons killed Höder for killing Balder, despite the fact that Höder had willed his brother Balder no harm; his body also was set in the death-ship. The gods meant to push the ship out to sea and set it on fire, but it was heavy as their grief and they could not stir it; at last they sent for a great giantess who rode in on a wolf, driven with reins made of snakes, and set the funeral ship afloat with one thrust of her great arms. (Thor had to be restrained from pulling out Mjöllnir and killing her for her pains.) Then torches were thrown into the ship, and the current caught it even as the flames did; it went far out into the great sea streaming fire, and the water burned gold. The gods stood watching after it and weeping, and so loved had Balder been that many of the race of giants stood nearby and also watched and wept.

But Hermód went his way through hard cold lands until at last, he came to the wild cold river Gjöll and the gilded bridge that crosses it. He rode onto the bridge, and then he stopped, for Hel's gate-guard stood there. She named herself Módgudr and asked him why he came that way; he made as much noise, she said, as five companies of dead men who had crossed the bridge together earlier that day, and his color was not that of the dead. He owned that he was not dead, but that he was bound to follow after Balder and seek to bring him back to the living lands, and he asked if Balder had ridden that way. Módgudr said that he had and pointed Hermód the way to go.

On he rode, through a land of black ice and bitter wind, until he came to Hel's cold hall. There he saw Balder sitting in a high seat, with his face pale as ice and his eyes bleak as winter, and the light of him extinguished; but still, he rose courteously at the sight of Hermód, and greeted him as gently as he would have done in the living world. The brothers spent that night speaking together, and their words remained a secret between them. But in the morning Hermód begged Hel to let Balder go back to Asgard, pleading that Balder's death had brought sorrow and loss to all the living world.

Hel was minded to test this boast. She would release Balder, she said, on one condition: that all things in the world, both the living and the lifeless, would weep for him.

Hermód rose to go then, wishing to hurry and collect the tears of all while the grief of Balder's passing was still raw in them. But Balder walked to the gate with him, and sent with him words of farewell to Odin; he also sent back the ring his father had laid in his funeral pyre. Nanna also came with them as far as the door of Hel's hall and sent gifts back to Frigg and to Frigg's servant Fulla. Plainly neither of them expected to return to Asgard.

Hermód still hoped, and he brought Hel's challenge back to the Aesir. These sent messengers out into all the worlds asking all they met to weep Balder out of Hel's hall. Gods and men and giants heeded the call. So did trees and stones and all the things that had first sworn not to harm Balder. Hope grew in the hearts of the Aesir, and joy seemed about to come forth from grief. But as the last messengers rode homeward they passed a cave they had not seen before, and they heard the sound of something—or perhaps someone—moving inside. They called a greeting at the cave-mouth, and a giantess came out to meet them. She introduced herself as Thökk. They explained their errand and asked her to weep for Balder. Always before that message had found good hearing, and they expected no less from Thökk. But she spoke insultingly of Balder and his father Odin, declared that she loved Balder not, neither living nor dead, and said laughing at the end: "Let Hel hold what she hath!"

But the messengers knew the sound of that laughter, and they saw through Thökk's disguise and recognized Loki. When he saw that he was known he fled, and they could not take him, but they carried the tale of him back to Asgard where they confessed their failure and Balder's unbreakable exile. The gods cursed Loki for damning Balder to Hel until the ending of the worlds, and perhaps it was in this conclave that they first remembered that Höder, after all, could hardly have thrown the dart so accurately at Balder without help and that before the fatal cast Loki had been seen at Höder's side.

Cheated of Balder, the gods resolved not to be cheated of revenge. They went out to hunt Loki in force—and not the Aesir only, but also Skadi the giantess who had hoped to win Balder for her husband in the glory-days of the Aesir.

Loki was warned of their coming, and he changed himself into a salmon and hid in a deep pool of the stream. But the fish disguise served him no better than it had served Andvari. The gods found his hiding place, and they cast for him with a net, and when he tried to leap over the net Thor caught him by the tail and held him gasping in the air until he took his own shape again for his breath's sake; though

less misery might have befallen him if he had died then and there.

They carried Loki into a cave and bound him fast. He could not cajole or bribe or bluster his way out of punishment, and Balder the gentle was no longer there to plead for mercy or justice instead of revenge, and the Aesir were mad with grief and anger. They killed two of Loki's sons before his eyes, that he might grieve as Odin had grieved. Then they chained him to the rock, and Skadi hung a venomous snake over his head, so that its poison dropped upon his face and burned him. At last they left Loki there and went away to nurse their grief.

When the angry gods were gone, and Skadi too, Loki's wife Sigyn came to him. She had no power to undo his bonds, or to kill or remove the snake. But she brought a basin which she held up under the flow of venom, so that her husband had respite from pain. Only when the basin was full to overflowing she had to turn aside and empty it, and the poison struck Loki's raw flesh again. His convulsions of pain shook all Midgard, and his cries were terrible. But he did not grieve for Balder; only for himself, knowing that he would never be freed until the coming of Ragnarök.

Notes:

This tale mainly follows Snorri Sturlusson's account in the Prose Edda *Gylfaginning*. The Poetic Eddas *Voluspo* (the Prophecy of the Seeress) and *Baldrs Draumar* (Balder's Dreams) tell parts of the story as well.

It's difficult to be sure how this tale fits sequentially with others. In the *Gylfaginning* it comes immediately before the prophecy of Ragnarök, the Day of Doom; also, since at its end Loki is bound until the world's ending, it seems that this tale must come after the tales in which Loki is at large in the world. On the other hand, when Skirnir woos Gerd on Frey's behalf he offers her a ring and says that Odin had laid it on Balder's pyre and Balder had sent it back to Odin; and on a later occasion when Loki, quite at liberty, wanders into a feast and insults the other Aesir, he taunts Frey with having given Skirnir his sword when he wooed Gerd... I've followed Snorri Sturlusson's timeline here. I suppose it stands to reason that Loki, the master of tricks, could not be neatly fitted into a human attempt to sequence stories logically.

Gylfaginning goes into very ugly detail about the punishment of Loki and his sons. I chose to skip that here.

Daniel McCoy notes that there is another medieval manuscript, the *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus, which describes Balder and Höder as mortal heroes who deliberately killed each other in a romantic dispute, but Snorri Sturlusson's version of this tale is far better known.

Chapter 17--Ragnarök

It is said that after Balder's death Odin felt the doom of the gods drawing near. But the time of the gods is not the time of mortals, and it seems that the Norse lived for many centuries in the gap of time between Balder's death and the Day of Doom. Balder's death was told as a thing finished and much mourned, while Ragnarök was yet to come. Still, the shape of the end was already known, for Odin had heard it foretold by a prophetess.

The first sign of the end in the world of men would be terrible storms, and midsummer days growing short as in winter. After the disordering of nature would come the disordering of men. There would be terrible wars—not that the world had ever been warless, but the fighting would grow crueler and more unceasing, and there would be an end of loyalty and courage; men and women would no longer keep any of the oaths they swore of love or of fealty or of alliance; incest and treachery would become commonplace. Then the summer heat would fail entirely. Three winters would come in succession with no planting-time between. Men would look to the heavens and despair of the cold and pallor of the sun, and at the earth and despair of the hunger in their bellies and the hate in the eyes of their fellow-men: the prophetess called it “a wind-time, a wolf-time, before the world falls.”

Then the great World Tree itself would shake, and all the heavens and the earths that hung from it would tremble, and all bonds be broken. The wolves who have chased the sun and moon across the heavens since the beginning of time would overtake their prey at last in that convulsion, and the earth would be thrown into darkness. Loki would break free from his irons and flee to Jotunheim to join the giants in their battle against the gods. The cold sea would swell to a great height, and an icy wave roll toward Asgard; on the crest of that wave would ride the great ship Naglfare, made from the fingernails and toenails of dead mortals. (One version of the prophecy said that Ragnarök would not come until there were enough dead nails on hand to allow Naglfare to be constructed; therefore devout and prudent people kept their nails very short indeed, not to hasten the building.) Loki and the giant Hrimir would stand together at the prow of that ship, laughing to see destruction coming on the gods; and the ship would be filled with a great host of giants.

But the giants were not the only foes with whom the gods had to reckon. Loki's wolf-son Fenrir, whose binding was accomplished at the cost of Tyr's hand, would also break free and open his jaws, reaching from the earth below to the heavens above. The Midgard Serpent, Loki's other son, would rise thrashing from the depths of the sea and

loom over Asgard. And behind them all would come the glittering army of Muspelheim, the world of fire, casting a terrible light over the darkened lands.

The gods knew that they would not win that battle, but also that they would not shrink from it. Their host would go out for the last battle, hopeless but also fearless. Odin would lead the charge against Fenrir and be swallowed for his pains, though Odin's son Vidar would kill the wolf and avenge his father. Thor would throttle his old enemy the Midgard Serpent before dying of the poison it spit over him. Tyr would lose his remaining hand and his life contending with another wolf, though it would die with him. Loki and the god Heimdall also would fall fighting each other. And then, as the armies of gods and monsters reeled from their terrible losses, the fire-giants would arrive from Muspelheim. Frey, the sea-god's son, would stand against Surt the leader of the hosts of fire, but he would stand weaponless, having given his wonder-sword to Skirnir (Skirnir's whereabouts during the battle were not clearly established), and he would fall. Then Surt would fling out fires hotter than the eruption of any volcano in Midgard, consuming everything they touched. The world would end, as it began, in fire.

But that ending would lead to another beginning. As Asgard and Midgard had been formed in the void between ice and fire, so as Surt's fires sank into the icy sea a new world would rise like an island in the empty waves, a green land and fair. The woman who was the Sun would have given birth to a daughter before her death, and in the new world, that daughter would rise radiant. Her light would flash on the waterfalls of the young world, and give sight to its eagles, and bring forth flowers and fruit from the earth with no human needed to tend them. In that new world all evil would be dead and forgotten. Balder would come again to rule that young world, and his brother Höder with him, and no bitterness in the heart of either brother for the manner of their deaths before. Perhaps others of the gods would return as well. And mortal humans also would return. In a secret place far from the wars of gods and monsters Lif and Lifthrasir would be hidden through the days of destruction and brought into the new green world to fill it with a people who would know that joy and peace which had seldom appeared in Asgard and Midgard before.

And for those who had died in Midgard before the Day of Doom, another resurrection awaited. There would be a new heaven as well as a new earth, and in the gold-roofed hall called Gimle those who had been just, or pure of heart, or good as the teller defined goodness (ideas about this varied then, as they do now) would live in bliss forever. Some stories said there would also be colder and fouler places for those who had been murderers, oathbreakers or adulterers; others

said that place of punishment was part of the old world that would die with Odin and Loki and the giants.

When Snorri told this tale, he spoke as though the bliss of this new world would be unending. In the older poem of the prophecy given to Odin, the prophetess' last words spoke of a dragon rising with its mouth full of corpses. Some translators say this must be a mistake, a bit of the earlier story of struggle dropped in the wrong place. Perhaps it is so. Perhaps it is foolish to expect any clear understanding of the end of the world, and of what follows after the end .

Notes:

This account is taken from Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* and from the Poetic Edda *Voluspo* . The two accounts differ in various points; I have noted the most important disagreements in the story itself.

Chapter 18: Grace Note: The Story of Rolf Krake

King Rolf's name is less well-known than those of the Volsungs, and nobody claims that he was the son of a god, but his life and the lives of those who had to deal with him were rather happier than the lives of the Volsungs and their neighbors had been. And in Snorri Sturlusson's time Rolf Krake was still remembered with honor and affection, and a little laughter as well. Snorri said of him that he was the bravest of men, and also the mildest and most gracious.

Rolf is the name he was born with, but the name Krake was given to him in this way: Rolf took the throne in Hleidra as a young man, and a rather small young man at that, not particularly impressive to look at. One day a poor fellow named Vog came into the court, and he stared at the great throne and the little king on it. He stared and stared until everyone in the great hall was staring at him and the young king. Then King Rolf asked Vog what he meant by staring in that way.

Vog, less daunted than he had expected to be by the splendor of the King and of the court, answered freely. When he was at home, he said, he had heard marvelous things of Hleidra, and everyone said that King Rolf who reigned there was the greatest man in all the Northlands—so he made the long journey to Hleidra to behold the wonder for himself, and what did he see but a little crow (krake, in their tongue) perched on the high-seat and calling itself a king!

The people standing near Vog began to murmur and back away, for, small or no, Rolf was King, and to mock a King was to invite summary and severe punishment. Some of them might have secretly treasured Vog's description of the King, but they reckoned themselves too wise to imagine repeating it in the King's hearing or to laugh at it where the King could see them.

King Rolf stared at Vog as long as Vog had stared at him, and at last, he smiled. "You have given me a name," he said to Vog, "and I will be called Rolf Krake from this day forward. But it is customary for a gift to be given along with a name." He looked thoughtfully at Vog, who began to reflect that he had nothing which a King was likely to think worth accepting either as a name-day gift or as a fine for insolence. King Rolf shrugged. "Well, since you don't have anything to give me along with my name—anything that would be suitable to me—the one who does have, should give." So saying, he took a gold ring from his hand and gave it to Vog .

Now it was Vog's turn to smile, once he was done spluttering with amazement. "You give as the best king of all," he said, "and now I'll be the enemy of anyone who dares to make himself your enemy." King Rolf Krake laughed freely then, saying, "A small thing makes Vog

happy!”

King Rolf Krake grew to manhood, and the Saxons attacked from over the sea so that his army was hard pressed to defend his kingdom. But in the midst of that battle, a messenger rode up to his gates on an exhausted horse, asking his help in the war which King Adils of Upsala, the second husband of Rolf Krake's mother Yrsa, was fighting against the King of Norway. King Adils offered to pay all the expenses of Rolf Krake's army, and besides to give him any three treasures he might choose. King Rolf Krake was in no position to leave fighting the Saxons, but for his mother's sake he sent his twelve best fighters riding posthaste to Upsala; those men were berserkers, and no one dared to stand against them in their battle-madness. With their help King Adils won his victory, and at the end they asked for their pay and named the treasures they chose to carry back to their King. But King Adils refused pay and treasure alike and sent the men back empty-handed.

Returning to Hleidra, the berserkers found the Saxons driven away and the land at peace. But when they told their tale King Rolf Krake was angry, and he armed himself and rode back with them to Upsala. There King Adils refused to admit them into the great hall, but Yrsa welcomed her son in another lodging, gave him and his warriors food and drink and treated them with honor. It seems King Adils objected to this as well; at any rate, when Yrsa had left the guest-hall Adils sent men who suddenly flung great pitchy branches onto the fire so that it sprang up and scorched away the clothes of King Rolf Krake and his men, and they shouted mockingly from the door, asking if it were really true that neither fire nor steel could make Rolf Krake and his berserkers flee. Hearing this, Rolf Krake suspected that there were plenty of steel-armed men waiting at the door for any who fled the fire that way. So he waited until the fire had burned through the back wall of the house, and then he and his men threw their shields into the blaze to make a path for themselves. Straight through the fire they ran on that bridge of hot metal, and Rolf Krake shouted back to the mockers that the man who leaped over a fire couldn't be said to have fled it. Then he and his men shoved the arsonists into the burning building.

Yrsa came out too late to stop the burning. She gave her son a horn full of gold and a golden ring, and she told him to be on his way. He and his men heeded that warning and rode away together, with the wind cold on their scorched skins. But soon they heard hoofbeats pounding behind them: King Adils and a great army, intent on killing the guests they had been unable to humiliate or to burn.

Sigurd perhaps would have fought his way through them or else died a hero. King Rolf Krake had a different idea. He scattered his mother's

gold coins behind him as he fled. King Adils' soldiers saw them gleaming in the moonlight and stopped, first to pick them up, then to quarrel over who got to keep what, ignoring King Adils' orders for them to keep up the pursuit. Only King Adils himself held his course, riding like fury after his son-in-law. It was thirteen to one then, and presumably King Rolf Krake could easily have had the other man killed, if he was willing to leave his mother a widow and his kingdom embroiled in a blood-feud. He instead took the ring his mother had given him and threw it back over his shoulder to King Adils, shouting to him that he should keep it as a gift.

Maybe Adils knew the ring for his wife's and had second thoughts. Maybe he saw that it was fair and he wanted it. Maybe it had occurred to him that he was riding to his death, and he was ready for a face-saving way out of that. Be that as it might, he leaned down from his horse to pick the ring up with his spear. As he straightened again, he saw that his son-in-law had turned back to meet him, close enough for a death-blow had he been so minded. King Rolf Krake looked at his father-in-law and said, "You're supposed to be the greatest of all the Swedes, and I've made you bend over like a pig." King Adils found himself at a loss for words. He sat silently, staring, as King Rolf Krake and his men rode home together, laughing.

Notes:

This story comes from Snorri Sturluson's *Skáldskaparmál* . All speculation about motives is my own.

I've added this tale as an end-note because it wasn't clear where it fits in the sweep of the grander narrative. But I found Rolf Krake's tale a delightful counterpoint to the bloody, proud and somber stories of the Volsungs, and wanted to include that aspect of the rich tapestry of Norse literature.

Conclusion

This book gives an introduction to some of the basic stories told in surviving primary sources. If you'd like to explore the world of Norse mythology further, here are a few suggestions. Many primary sources are widely available in the public domain.

The tales in this book are taken primarily from the Eddas. The Poetic Eddas are the older texts. They are often fragmentary, and scholars argue about stanza order, about the divisions between different works, and about what some words and lines mean. A thoroughly annotated collection of all the Poetic Eddas, translated in 1936 by Henry Adams Bellows, is online at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/neu/poe/index.htm>. Your library may have other translations. The Prose Eddas of Snorri Sturlusson are sequential, intact and easy to understand. As Snorri was Christian and made intermittent attempts to harmonize his stories with the Christian stories, some people interested in understanding ancient Norse religion find him frustrating and unreliable. I've drawn from the first two Eddas, *Gylfaginning* and *Skaldskaparmal*, which can easily be found online in English in several places; the third, *Hattatal*, is somewhat obscurer and harder to find in an easily readable English translation.

I've found some useful notes on Norse religion, and on obscurer primary sources, on Daniel McCoy's site www.norse-mythology.org

Glossary of Names

Adils Mortal man, King, husband of Yrsa and father-in-law of Rolf Krake (see chapter 18)

Aesir (asas) Collective name of the gods who originally lived in Asgard (all the gods in this story except Njord, Frey and Freya)

Agnar The first Agnar was the elder brother of Geirröth and fosterling of Frigg; the younger was Geirröth's son; see Chapter 9.

Alf Mortal man, King, who married Hjordis and became the host and protector of Sigurd in his youth; see Chapter 11.

Andvari Dwarf, vastly wealthy, whose treasure Loki stole to repay a blood-debt, and whose curse lingered on that treasure and brought destruction to Sigurd's family and also perhaps to the gods. Andvari's own story is told in Chapter 10; the effects of the curse are seen in chapters 10-15 (or perhaps 10-17.)

Balder (Baldur) God, son of Odin and Frigg, husband of Nanna; he was the most beautiful of the gods, and lord of the Peace Stead; featured in Chapter 16, also appearing in Chapters 2, 6, and 17

Bolverk Alias of Odin's when he went to steal the mead of poetry (Chapter 4); the name means "Worker of Evil."

Brok Dwarf, brother and helper of the master-smith Sindre who made precious gifts for the gods and won a wager against Loki; see Chapter 5.

Brynhild (Brunhilda) A Valkyrie and a wise-woman; lover of Sigurd, and causer of his death; see Chapters 13-15.

Fafnir Mortal man, enchanter, son of Hreidmar and brother of Otr, Regin and Lyngheith; he killed his father to get Andvari's gold, and later transformed himself into a dragon to guard the gold; see Chapters 10 and 12.

Fenrir A wolf, the son of Loki and a giantess; safely tied in Chapter 3 (at a great price), and loosed to catastrophic effect in Chapter 17.

Freya (Freyja) Goddess, daughter of the sea-god Njord, sister of Frey; one of the Vanir left in Asgard as a hostage (see Chapter 2), though she seems quickly to have made herself at home. Wise-woman and keeper of a feather-cloak allowing the wearer to take a bird's shape. Also the most beautiful of the goddesses. Disastrous attempts by giants to marry her by force or trickery are described in Chapters 2 and 7. Many of her characteristics are similar to Frigg's.

Frigg (Frigga) Goddess, wife of Odin and mother of Balder. Wise-woman and keeper of a feather-cloak allowing the wearer to take a bird's shape. Said by some to be the goddess of married love, though her marriage with Odin seems to have had its ups and downs (see chapter 9). See also Chapters 2 and 16. Friday is named after her.

Fulla Maidservant to Frigg, sent to Geirröth in Chapter 9, remembered by Balder's wife Nanna in Chapter 16.

Geirröth Mortal man, fosterling of Odin, and also unwitting and unkind host to Odin later in life; brother and father to Agnar; see Chapter 9.

Gerd (Gerth, Gerdr) Giantess, reluctantly married to Frey, and indirect cause of his death at Ragnarök; see Chapters 6 and 17.

Giuki (Gjuke) Mortal man, King, husband of Grimhild, father of Gunnar, Gudrun, Hogni, and Guttorm; see Chapters 13-15

Grani Sigurd's horse, chosen for him by Odin, a descendant of Odin's horse Sleipnir; see Chapters 11-14

Grimhild Mortal woman, Queen and sorceress, wife of Giuki and mother of Gunnar, Gudrun, Hogni, and Guttorm; see Chapters 13-15

Grimnir Alias used by Odin when he went to test Geirröth's hospitality in Chapter 9

Gudrun Mortal woman, Queen, daughter of Giuki and Grimhild, sister of Gunnar, Hogni and Guttorm, wife of Sigurd; see chapters 13-15

Gunnar Mortal man, King, son of Giuki and Grimhild, brother of Gudrun, Hogni and Guttorm, sworn brother of Sigurd, husband of Brynhild; see chapters 13-15

Guttorm Mortal man, oldest son of Giuki and Grimhild, youngest brother of Gudrun, Gunnar and Hogni, killer of Sigurd; see chapter 15

Heimdall Aesir God, son of Odin by nine different mothers (don't ask me how that happened), warden of Asgard, killer of Loki in the last battle (Chapter 17)

Heimir Mortal man, foster-father of Brynhild; see Chapters 13 and 14

Hel Goddess, daughter of Loki and a giantess, ruler of the cold world called Hel, Helheim or Niflhel where the souls of dead mortals went if they were not deserving or lucky enough to be taken into Asgard—and also, apparently, where dead gods went regardless of deserving. See Chapter 3 and 16 .

Hermod God, son of Odin and brother of Balder, who rode to Niflhel after Balder's death to plead for his return (see Chapter 16)

Hindfell Mountain where Brynhild's castle stood inside a ring of eternal fire

Hjordis Mortal woman, Queen, wife of Sigmund (later, of Alf) and mother of Sigurd; see Chapter 11

Höder God, blind, brother of Balder, and his accidental killer (see Chapter 16.)

Hogni Mortal man, middle son of Giuki and Grimhild, brother of Gudrun, Gunnar and Guttorm, sworn brother of Sigurd; see Chapter 15

Hreidmar Mortal man, sorcerer, father of Otr, Fafnir, Regin and Lyngheith, host and then captor of Odin and Loki in Chapter 10

Iduna Goddess, keeper of the Apples of Youth which kept the gods from aging; her kidnapping and rescue are described in Chapter 5

Jormungandr The Midgard Serpent, the son of Loki and a giantess, lying quiet in the depths of the sea until Ragnarök; see chapters 3, 8, and 17

Jotunheim A wild and icy world or region, home to the giants

Loki God, husband of Sigyn and father of Sleipnir, Fenris, Jormungandr and Hel, among many others. Trickster, often responsible for getting the gods both into and out of trouble, though sometimes doing only one or the other. Active in Chapters 2-8, 16 and 17.

Lyngheith Mortal woman, daughter of Hreidmar, sister of Otr, Fafnir and Regin, and substantially less bloody-minded than the rest of her family; see Chapter 10

Lyngi Mortal man, King, rival with Sigmund for the love of Hjordis, killer of Sigmund, later killed by Sigurd; see Chapter 11

Midgard The world of men, created by the Aesir in Chapter 1

Mimir Mysterious being, guardian of the Well of Wisdom, whose encounter with Odin is described in Chapter 3. Another story, not recorded in this book, describes a wise god named Mimir as a hostage sent to the Vanir by the Aesir; they killed him in a fit of bad temper and sent his head back to Odin, who consulted it on occasions when extra wisdom was needed.

Mjöllnir Thor's powerful hammer, whose name means Lightning; forged in Chapter 5, stolen, regained and used to great effect in Chapter 7, apparently useless in Chapter 8

Muspelheim The primordial world of fire which came into being before Midgard, and whose sparks, mingling with the cold from Niflheim, created a place where life could arise (see Chapter 1); also home of Surt and the fire-giants who would destroy the world (see Chapter 17)

Nanna Goddess, wife of Balder; see Chapter 1 6

Niflhel One name for the cold world of the unfortunate dead ruled over by the goddess Hel; sometimes also called Hel or Helheim; apparently closely related to Niflheim

Niflheim The primordial world of ice and venom, whose waters, mingled with the warmth of Muspelheim, created a place where life could arise (see Chapter 1)

Njord (Njorth) God of the sea, father of Frey and Freya; not one of the original Aesir, but a hostage sent by the Vanir to Asgard after the war

(see Chapter 2); briefly married to Skadi (see chapter 6)

Norns Wise women, immortal, who wove the fates of mortals; see chapter 3

Odin (Wotan, Woden; also many aliases) God, husband to Frigg, and father to Balder, Thor, and many of the other gods; king and wisest member of the Aesir and destroyer of the giant Ymir; master of Valhalla and Valaskjalf; appears under many disguises in the worlds of men and giants. Featured in Chapters 1, 3, 4, 9, 10, 16 and 17, and present in most of the other chapters. Wednesday is named after him.

Regin Mortal man, smith, son of Hreidmar, brother of Otr, Fafnir and Lyngheith, and foster-father of Sigurd; see chapters 10-12.

Rolf Krake Mortal man, King, son of Yrsa and son-in-law of Adils (see chapter 18)

Skadi Giantess, sometimes worshipped as goddess of hunting, daughter of Thiassi, briefly married to Njord; see Chapter 6 (and, briefly, Chapter 16)

Skirnir Servant of Frey, responsible for winning him Gerd and also for depriving him of his sword; see Chapter 6

Skrymir Giant and enchanter, responsible for making Thor miserable in Chapter 8

Sif Goddess, wife of Thor; Loki stole her hair in Chapter 5

Sigmund Mortal man, King; said to be descended from Odin; husband of Hjordis and father of Sigurd. See Chapter 11. (His name was also given to Sigurd's son with Gudrun.)

Sigurd Mortal man, son of Sigmund and Hjordis, foster-son and killer of Regin, lover of Brynhild, husband of Gudrun, sworn brother of Gunnar and Hogni, killer of Fafnir. Central figure in Chapters 11-15.

Sigyn Goddess, wife of Loki, responsible for making his imprisonment after Balder's death slightly less unbearable; see Chapter 16.

Sindre Dwarf, master smith, brother of Brok, maker of Thor's hammer and other treasures of the gods, and winner of a wager with Loki; see Chapter 5

Sleipnir Odin's horse, the son of Loki in mare's form and the stallion Svadifari. He's said to be the ancestor of Sigurd's horse Grani. For his getting, see Chapter 2; he is ridden in other stories, notably in Chapter 16.

Surt Fire-giant, responsible for the final destruction of the worlds (see Chapter 17)

Svadilfari Stallion who carried stone for the giant who built Asgard's wall on a wager in Chapter 2; led astray at the last minute by Loki, who prevented the wager being won; father of Sleipnir

Thiassi (Thjasse) Giant and enchanter, father of Skadi, kidnapper of

Iduna, foiled of his aim and killed by the gods in Chapter 5; avenged after a fashion by his daughter in Chapter 6

Thor God, son of Odin and the giantess Jord, husband of Sif; wielder of the lightning-hammer Mjölnir; often called on to bless weddings; also honored by warriors; a tireless and fearless fighter, impossible to daunt but rather easy to deceive and somewhat prone to losing his temper. Featured in Chapters 7 and 8, and to a lesser degree 5 and 17, also mentioned in other chapters. Thursday is named after him.

Thrym Giant, wealthy and ambitious; his name means Noisy; he stole Thor's hammer, tried to get Freya as his bride, and got an unpleasant surprise in Chapter 7.

Tyr God and warrior, stout-hearted as Thor but perhaps cooler-headed. Featured in Chapter 3; also comes up in Chapter 17. Tuesday is named after him.

Utgard -Loke Giant and enchanter, also appearing as Skrymir; see Chapter 8

Valaskjalf High seat of Odin, from which he could look out over all the worlds

Valhalla Feast-hall of Odin, where the souls of many of the brave dead feasted and fought amicably to keep themselves in practice for the Last Day

Valkyries Shieldmaidens—human? Divine? The stories vary on this point. At any rate, they chose who would live in battle and who would die, and they brought some of the brave dead to Odin (and perhaps also to Frigg.) Described generally in Chapter 2. Brynhild (Chapters 13-15) was one of them.

Vanir (Wanes) Another race of gods who first fought, then made peace, with the Aesir; Njord, Frey and Freya were Vanir left in Asgard as hostages or honored guests

Volsungs The family of Sigmund and Sigurd, said to be descended from Odin

Ymir Giant, one of the first living beings, and forefather of all the giants; Odin and his brothers killed Ymir and made the world from his body.

Yrsa Mortal woman, Queen, wife of Adils and mother of Rolf Krake

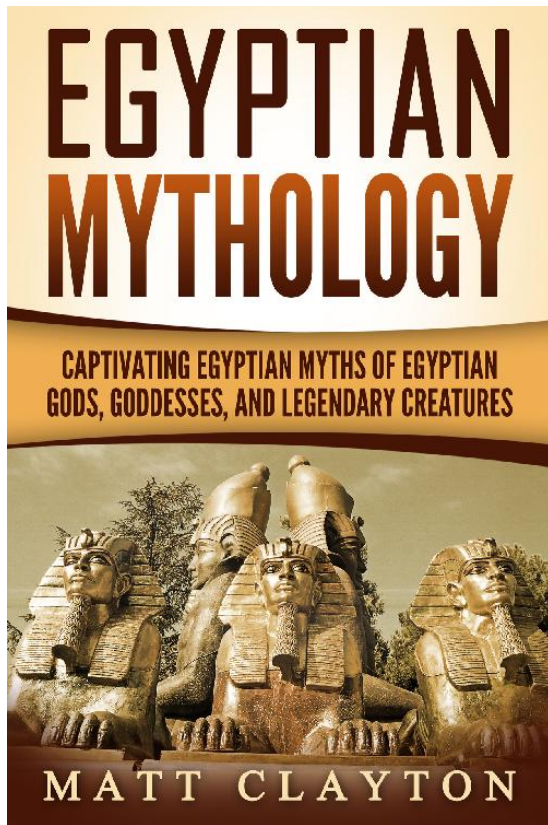
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Section 3: Egyptian Mythology

Captivating Egyptian Myths of Egyptian Gods, Goddesses, and Legendary Creatures



Introduction

Egyptian mythology is rich and complex, and survives in a great variety of sources, from religious writings such as *The Book of the Dead* , to political stelae and pyramid carvings, to papyri containing hero stories and folktales. The religious texts preserve prayers, invocations, magic spells, and other scriptures for use in the worship of the gods. Many of these writings concentrate on the safe conduct of the soul through the dangers of the *Tuat* , or Underworld, and into the afterlife, which was an absolutely central concern of Egyptian religion. Political writings tell of the deeds of the pharaohs or Egyptian kings and sometimes create new myths in order to legitimize a pharaoh's rule by attempting to show that he (or, rarely, she) was favored by the gods. Indeed, the pharaohs were sometimes conceptualized as descendants of the god Ra himself, or as divinities in their own right. And Egyptian folktales and hero stories work in much the same way as Greek myths do, for example, or what we call "fairy tales," relating magical adventures and wondrous events, involving human interaction with the supernatural or even the divine.

It is unsurprising that two of the primary images in Egyptian mythology and the two primary divine personifications are of sun and water. A North African desert country, Egypt is at the mercy of the sun, which brings light and life but also has a ferociously destructive aspect. This stands in contrast to the waters of the Nile, which create both a rhythm for the year and also the fertility of the land upon which the Egyptians depend. The two opposing qualities of the sun are reflected in sun-gods such as Ra who bring creation into being, and in the destructive goddess Sekhmet, who personifies the ability of the sun to injure and kill. Water shows its importance in many creation myths wherein all creation has its ultimate origin in the god Nun, the primordial Void of the Waters, while other gods are responsible for ensuring the yearly inundations of the Nile.

The Egyptian pantheon is not limited to gods of sun and water, however. The religious mind of the ancient Egyptians was remarkably fertile, and there are hundreds, if not thousands, of named gods, each with their own offices to perform. Many of these exist solely in the Underworld, but others have more active roles in the land of the living. Egyptian religion also treated the gods very fluidly: many gods had more than one aspect or form, and when needed aspects of two different gods might be combined into one. For example, the sun-god Ra existed as Af Ra ("dead Ra") at night, when wrapped as a mummy he was conveyed in his boat across the Underworld between sunset and sunrise; as the scarab beetle Khepera at dawn, when he pushed the sun above the horizon in the same way as a scarab beetle pushes a

ball of dung; and his form as Ra-Horakhty, the god of the rising sun, which combined elements of both the creator-god Ra and the hawk-god Horus, who was a god of the sky, of light, and of kingship. Sometimes one god or goddess might be transformed entirely into another, as we see with Hathor/Sekhmet in the story “The Destruction of Mankind,” where the mild and maternal cow-goddess Hathor becomes the fierce, bloodthirsty lioness-goddess Sekhmet in order to go on a rampage against the enemies of Ra.

Worship of the gods, the compilation of their myths, and the relative importance of different gods also depended in part on location. For example, the creation myths of Heliopolis, Hermopolis, and Memphis all had in common the idea of a primordial hill and of life issuing forth from water, but the gods and goddesses responsible for the act of creation vary. In Heliopolis, it was Atum who creates the world; in Hermopolis, the Eight Gods create a lotus that gives birth to the great creator-god Ra; and in Memphis Ptah brings the world into being.

Rivalries among various priesthoods over whose god was the most powerful or should be considered most worthy of worship also influenced local religious practice and therefore the content and preservation of myths. For example, Osiris was an extremely important god and very widely worshiped throughout Egypt, but documents that come from Thebes seem to show an attempt by the priests of Amen-Ra to elevate their god above Osiris.

This book is divided into four parts. The first, titled “Cosmological Narratives,” contains myths concerning the creation of the world and how the ancient Egyptians understood the structure of the Underworld and the passage to the afterlife. “Myths of the Gods” contains the great myths of the gods Ra, Isis, Osiris, Horus, and Set. The third section contains two political myths, the tale of the birth of Hatshepsut and “The Tale of the Famine,” both of which are stories created by rulers to consolidate their power by claiming divine intervention and favor. Other stories, similar to what we today would call fairy tales, make up the last section of the book, and are full of magical wonders, animals that speak, and gods who reveal themselves to human beings and take an active role in their affairs. These stories aren’t always entirely based on fictional or mythical characters though: the last two stories feature Setne Khamwas, who was a son of Pharaoh Rameses II and who later became a favorite hero of folk tales.

Because the Egyptian pantheon was so extensive and fluid, a select glossary is included at the end. The glossary also contains definitions of select terms that are important for understanding some of the concepts in the stories, such as the Egyptian classification of parts of the soul. A brief timeline of ancient Egyptian history also follows this introduction.

Timeline of Ancient Egypt

This brief timeline of the history of ancient Egypt includes notes on historical characters that are either well-known or are mentioned in the stories presented below.

Dates	Period
1. 3000-2650 BC	Archaic Period
3. 2650-2135	Old Kingdom
<i>Djoser second half of 26th century bc (dates unclear)</i>	
<i>Khufu (Cheops), first half of 25th century bc (dates unclear)</i>	
6. 2135-2040	Transition to the Middle Kingdom
11. 2040-1650	Middle Kingdom
15. 1650-1550	Hyksos Period
<i>The Hyksos were foreign invaders, possibly from Western Asia</i>	
18. 1550-1080	New Kingdom
<i>Thutmose II, r. 1492-1479 bc</i>	
<i>Hatshepsut, r. 1479-1458 bc</i>	
<i>Akhenaten, "The Heretic King," r. 1353-1336 bc</i>	
<i>Tutankhamum, r. 1336-1327 bc</i>	
<i>Rameses II, r. 1279-1212 bc</i>	
21. 660-332	Late Period
<i>The Late Period saw repeated incursions by outside rulers:</i>	
<i>27th Dynasty (525-404): Persian rulers</i>	
<i>28th -30th Dynasty (404-341): Egyptian Pharaohs</i>	
<i>31st Dynasty (341-332 bc): return of Persian rule</i>	
<i>Alexander the Great (332-323 bc)</i>	
323-30	Ptolemaic Period
<i>Rule by Macedonian Greeks after the death of Alexander, starting with Ptolemy I, who had been appointed satrap of Egypt upon Alexander's death and later declared himself king; includes the reign of Cleopatra (51-30 bc)</i>	

30 BC -395 AD

Roman Period

*Egypt annexed as part of the Roman
Empire*

Part I

Cosmological Narratives

Creation Myths

The ancient Egyptians did not have a unitary creation myth. The stories of how the world came to be vary across time and also differ according to location. In Heliopolis, for example, Atum is the creator-god from whom all other things arise, but in Memphis, Atum is himself a creation of a greater god named Ptah. The great god Ra also existed as a creator-god and often was conflated with Atum and other similar gods. There are also two different groupings of gods, the Eight and the Nine. The Eight Gods are from the Hermopolitan myth, and vanish from the scene once creation gets started. The Nine are from Heliopolis, although they also were incorporated into other cosmogonies elsewhere, and they remain active after the work of creation has been accomplished. Despite these variations, certain elements, such as the primordial hill and the Void of the Waters, often are held in common by many of these myths.

Atum Creates the World

Heliopolis

Once there was nothing but Nun, nothing but the waters of Nun. And the waters of Nun were formless, and they were dark. And from Nun, from the Void of the Waters, sprang Atum, the first of the gods, the creator of the gods, and all that is. Atum wished for bodily pleasure, so he pleased himself, and from his seed sprang Shu, who is the air, and Tefnut, who is the light.

Shu and Tefnut were alone with Atum, alone on the primordial hill in the waters of Nun, and they became separated from one another. This caused Atum great grief, for he loved his children. Atum sent his Eye to look for Shu and Tefnut, and while his Eye was gone from him, Atum replaced it with another, greater Eye .

Soon enough, Shu and Tefnut returned with Atum's first Eye. The first Eye saw that Atum had supplanted it with another, greater Eye, and it became jealous. Atum took pity on the first Eye in its anger and distress, and took the first Eye, placing it firmly in his forehead. With this Eye he could see all that he had created and all that had and will happen in heaven and upon the earth, and in Tuat, the underworld of the dead.

When Shu and Tefnut returned, Atum was so overjoyed to see his children again that he wept, and from his tears sprang human beings. But there was nothing else yet in creation but the people and the primordial hill in the Void of the Waters; much work had yet to be

done. Therefore Atum, Shu, and Tefnut began the work of creating the world and making a place for the people to live in.

Shu and Tefnut came together in love, and from them sprang Geb, who is the surface of the earth, and Nut, who is the sky. From the union of Geb and Nut came Isis, Osiris, Nephthys, and Set. Shu and Tefnut, who are air and light, separate Geb and Nut, and together they hold up the sky.

The Eye of Atum is something that is both part of Atum and separate from him. Atum is a solar deity, so his Eye is sometimes a personification of the sun. However, it also represents the power of the god, generally, and therefore is something that he can give to others to use and then take back again or, as we see in this story, can be sent on errands by itself. This concept of a separable Eye also pertains to Ra, who in some parts of Egypt supplanted Atum as the primary deity.

Ra and the Eight Gods Create the World

Hermopolis

Before all things, there were the Eight who are the Four and their Consorts. These were Nun and Naunet, Huh and Hauhet, Kuk and Kauket, Amen and Amaunet. And these together were water, unendingness, darkness, and the unseen which is the air or wind. The Four Gods had the heads of frogs, and their Consorts the heads of snakes. Together the Eight Gods hatched out from the primeval mound that stood within the Void of the Waters.

The Eight Gods made the Nile and caused it to have its flood time and its receding. They made the lotus grow out of the waters, and when the lotus opened, inside was a scarab beetle. The scarab beetle transformed itself into a divine child, and this child was the god Ra. The lotus is thus the birthplace of the sun, who is Ra, and the lotus is the Eye of Ra.

When the child Ra wept, his tears created human beings. From Ra's mouth came all the other gods. Therefore, from the Eight came the lotus, and from the lotus came Ra, and from Ra came all there is, both humans and divine beings, and the whole world. Seeing that all had been made and all was done, the Eight Gods died and went to the Underworld. Ra and the other gods remained to rule over creation.

The Myth of the Cosmic Egg

Hermopolis

Before the world was made, there was nothing but the primeval mound, and a goose came to the mound. This goose was named the "Great Cackler." The goose laid an egg upon this mound, and when the time was right, the god Ra burst forth from the egg in the form of a bird of light. Ra then went on to create all that is.

Some say it was not a goose that laid this egg, but an ibis, which is the god Thoth. Those who believe this say that the god Thoth arose uncreated from the nothingness that was, and the Eight Gods are his souls. Together Thoth and the Eight Gods made the world.

Ptah Creates the World

Memphis

In the nothingness that was before all of creation, first there was Ptah, who was also Nun, the Void of the Waters. And from the heart and tongue of Ptah sprang Atum, the first of the gods. And from the seed of Atum came Shu and Tefnut, who are air and sky. From the seed of Atum, and from the words of Atum, came the Nine Gods.

But Ptah was mightiest of all, above all other gods. He was the one who first created the gods and was the one from whom all other things came to be. Ptah created Egypt and divided her into her nomes. He established the temples of the gods and commanded where and when the gods should be worshiped. Ptah created the souls of all things, giving them their *ka* that they might live. Ptah created animals and plants and all good things that are for the use of people upon the earth.

Khnum Creates the World

Elephantine

In the beginning, there was Khnum. Khnum wished to create, so he made the gods, and it was he who fashioned the egg from which sprang the sun.

Khnum also made the earth and everything that is on it. He made the Nile River with its floods, and he made the sea, and he made fish to swim in the waters. He made animals of every kind, cattle and sheep, lions and crocodiles. Khnum also made the birds to fly in the sky.

Khnum put many useful things in the earth, stone to build with, along with beautiful gems. He made trees, flowers, and all manner of plants and fruit for his creatures to use for food.

Then Khnum wished to make people, so he took clay and threw it on his potter's wheel. He spun the wheel and shaped the clay, and from the clay Khnum made human beings. First, he made their blood and bones. Then he gave them skin and hair, lungs to breathe with, a stomach for food, and genitals for begetting children. He gave them hands that they might do useful things, and legs and feet for walking and running. Khnum made all the different kinds of people that walk upon the earth and set them in their own lands and gave them their own languages to speak. And to the peoples of the different lands, he gave many gifts and taught them to make useful things that they might trade with their neighbors. Because of Khnum, the world was a

good place to live and prosper.

Many cultures have narratives of a great flood, and the Egyptian tradition is no exception. However, unlike the biblical and ancient Greek flood narratives in which the flood comes as punishment for wickedness, the Egyptian flood is intended to save humankind from the wrath of a destructive goddess. In the biblical story of Noah and the Greek tale of Deucalion, one man and his family are singled out as being the righteous ones who deserve to be saved, but in the Egyptian tradition it is all humans that Ra wishes to shelter from the wrath of Sekhmet.

The Destruction of Humankind

Ra was the king of gods and men, who had no creator but who was the creator of all, having made humankind from his own tears. Ra looked down upon the earth, upon the people he had created, and he found that they were disrespectful to him. The people did not revere Ra as they ought. They did not make their prayers to him, and they did not follow in the ways of rightness. They mocked Ra, saying that he had become old and weak.

Ra took counsel with himself over this but came to no solution. So, Ra summoned to himself the other gods. He called to him the Eye of Ra; he called Shu and Tefnut; he called Geb and Nut; and he called Nun which is the Void of the Waters, and with them he took counsel.

The gods came to Ra, and they bowed before him, and they said, "Tell us what is on your mind."

And Ra said, "The people of the earth, whom I created from my own tears, are disrespectful to me and they do not follow in the ways of rightness. How must I deal with them?"

Nun said to Ra before the assembled gods, "O great Ra, greatest of the gods and greater even than myself, the Void of the Waters, send your wrath upon the people and smite them for their blasphemy."

Now, while the gods were taking counsel together, the wicked people became aware that the Eye of Ra was upon them, and they became afraid. They were so afraid that they left their cities and fled into the desert which the Eye of Ra saw.

Ra said to the assembled gods, "Behold! My vengeance shall be upon the wicked people, as the Void of the Waters counsels me. Hathor shall be the Eye of Ra, and she shall smite the wicked people."

Hathor went down to the earth, as Ra commanded, down into the desert where she killed a great many of the people. Then Hathor went before the great Ra and told him what she had done. Because of the vengeance of Ra that Hathor had wrought upon the people, she became Sekhmet, who is the heat of the sun upon the earth.

But Sekhmet was not sated with her killing. She went back to the

earth and returned to her slaughter. She wanted to wade once again in the blood of those she had killed .

Then Ra looked down and saw that the people were suffering from the wrath of the goddess, and he took pity on them. He called for the brewers to brew beer and for red ochre to be ground and put into the beer so that it looked like blood. And when the beer was brewed, Ra caused it to be poured out upon the earth. There was so much beer that it deeply flooded all the fields, even up to the knees of men, until all the land was covered with it.

The goddess Sekhmet saw the beer and began to drink it, thinking it was blood. She found that it was good, so she drank more. She was so pleased with the beer and soon so drunk upon it that she took no more thought for the people, and so they were saved from her wrath.

Then Ra called the goddess to himself and said to her, "In every Festival of the New Year, there shall be beer brewed for you to drink until you are drunk."

And this is why the people brew beer and drink deeply of it when the Festival of Hathor is held.

How Ra Made the Night Sky

After Ra had spent his wrath upon the wicked people who did not honor him and after he had caused the land to be flooded with beer to sate the bloodlust of Sekhmet, he felt himself to be ill with fever. Ra went to Nun, who is the Void of the Waters, and said, "My body burns and I am in pain. I feel weary now, more than I have ever felt before. I do not know what to do."

Nun saw how Ra had become weakened. Nun said to Shu, who is the air, "Take you up the Eye of Ra and perform his office while he is ill."

Shu did as Nun commanded. He took up the Eye of Ra and he strode the sky in Ra's place.

Nun said to Nut, who is the sky, "Help you also the great god Ra, for he is afflicted with fever and pain."

Nut said, "How am I to do this thing?"

Nun said, "Take Ra upon your back and carry him for a time."

Nut transformed herself into a great cow. She said to Ra, "Climb up onto my back. I will carry you until you feel better."

When the people saw Ra being carried on the back of a great cow, they felt sorry for having dishonored him earlier. The next day, the people armed themselves with many weapons and set out to destroy the enemies of Ra. Ra saw them marching against his enemies, and his heart was softened towards them. Ra said, "I forgive you your sins, for you have taken it upon yourselves to destroy my enemies."

Ra felt his weariness fall from him. He jumped off the back of Nut and

called into being a new Field, and across this Field he cast a multitude of stars .

This new Field and its stars together were very heavy. Nut's legs began to tremble with the strain of holding it up. Ra saw that Nut was having difficulty, so he caused four pillars to be set up to help her hold this new sky. Then Ra called to Shu, saying, "Come and help Nut carry her burden. Hold her up with your strength and keep watch on the four pillars that they also do their duty and do not break."

Shu came and placed himself below Nut. He took the weight of her belly upon his head, and he along with the four pillars helped Nut bear up the sky and its new stars.

When Ra had finished his work making the stars, he bid Thoth, who is the word and intelligence of the gods, to tell Geb, who is the earth, to come into his presence. Geb soon arrived and asked what Ra's bidding was.

Ra said to Geb, "The snakes that reside with you are dangerous. They cause trouble and defy me. I bid you watch them closely and tell me of their plans. I wish that they should be afraid of me. Soon I will go back up into the heavens. Tell the snakes that they cannot hide from me. I will find them even in their deepest holes. And I am going to give power to the people, power that they will wield over the snakes."

Then Ra turned to Thoth. "Come with me," said Ra. "I am going to make a new thing, a thing made of light. I shall make it in the Underworld. And while we are there, I wish you to write down what punishments there are to be for those who rebel against me. I wish to make you my deputy, the one who speaks in the place of Ra."

Ra's words to Thoth made the ibis bird come into being, the ibis who is the messenger of Thoth and sacred to him.

Ra again spoke to Thoth, saying, "Your duty also shall be to drive away the Ha-Nebu, the foreigners who invade our lands."

It was when Ra said these things to Thoth that the baboon was created, making the baboon and the ibis both forms of Thoth,

Then Ra again said to Thoth, "Also you shall have the power to speak before the court of the gods, and your beauty shall be in both heavens."

It was when Ra said these things to Thoth that the Moon was created. Thoth thus became the god of the Moon, which is like a second Eye of Ra.

There is no single "official" version of The Book of the Dead, which possibly is the most famous source of Egyptian myths. The book is largely a set of prayers and magic spells that the soul could use in order to traverse the dangers of the Underworld until it finally reaches paradise. An alternate title for The Book of the Dead is The Book of Coming Forth by

Day, since it was believed that passage into the afterlife allowed the soul of the deceased to visit the land of the living when it wished. Although the general purpose of the book as a guide for the soul on its way to the afterlife never changed, the contents varied somewhat across time and from place to place .

In ancient Egypt, both longer and shorter versions of The Book of the Dead were available for purchase. Buying a shortened form of the book allowed poorer families to provide for the soul of their loved one so that they might cross safely into the afterlife, while those who commanded greater resources might buy a copy with a more extended text.

The version below is a selection of chapters from The Book of the Dead based on the 1904 edition by Renouf and Naville. No attempt has been made to ensure the excerpts here come from the same source or even from the same era; the purpose of this section is to give a taste of the writings that make up The Book of the Dead, not to create an actual unified edition. I am also taking a certain amount of poetic license with the text, in terms of some repetitions and the flow of the words.

Excerpts from The Book of the Dead

Chapter I

Here is the beginning of *The Book of Coming Forth by Day* . This is a book about how to pass into the afterlife and go safely into paradise.

On the day of burial, the soul shall come forth and it shall say:
O Mighty Osiris, it is I, Thoth, who am here.

I also am the great god, he who rides the Barque of Millions of Years.

Nut is my mother.

I am Horus, and Osiris is my kinsman.

I have fought on thy behalf, and I have been victorious.

I am with Horus, I stand with him at the festivals of Osiris.

I am a priest; I am a prophet; I recite the litanies.

Let the soul of the dead be brought to the house of Osiris.

Let the soul of the dead live and breathe and see and hear even as the gods do.

Let the soul of the dead pass through into the afterlife;
grant him safe passage.

Chapter IX

When the soul arrives at the gates of the Underworld, it shall say:

O Osiris, see that it is I who have come.

I am here, I who am thy son.

I open the Underworld that I may come to Osiris, my father .

I open the Underworld that I may do the duties owed to Osiris.

Here am I, standing before the gates.
I have been properly swathed as a mummy.
I am ready for the journey.

Chapter XXIII

The soul asks that its mouth be opened, so that it may speak to the gods:

Come, O Ptah, and open thou my mouth,
and let Osiris also make me to speak.
Let Thoth come, let him remove the bonds that Set has put upon
my mouth.
There are those who speak against me,
those who use words of power against me,
may the gods set themselves against them!

Chapter XXIV

Then the soul collects the word of power it will need on its journey:

Behold, I am Khepera, the self-created one.
Here am I, and I collect my word of power.
I shall not tire in pursuit of my word.
Swifter am I than greyhounds,
swifter am I even than light.
I go to all places where might be my word,
I collect it from all the places where it is hid.

Chapter XXVI

The soul calls to its heart, to return it to the body:

Heart! Come thou to me!
Heart! Rest within me!
Let me eat the food of Osiris.
Let me have a boat for rowing upstream.
Let me have a boat for rowing downstream .
Let me have my mouth, that I may speak,
and my feet, that I may walk,
and my arms and hands, that I may fight my enemies
victoriously.
May Geb open my eyes,
and my mouth,
and enliven my two hands.
May Anubis make me to walk upon my legs.
May Sekhmet lift me up that I may come to paradise.
Now I have my whole heart.
Now I have my two arms.

Now I have my two legs.
Now I may do whatever my *ka* pleases.
Now my *ba* is not bound to my body,
when I enter the gates of the afterlife.

Chapter XXXI

Crocodiles of the Underworld approach the soul. They try to steal the soul's word of power. But the soul chases them off, saying:

Back! Crocodile, back!
Crocodile, do not approach!
I say the name of the great god,
and the great god sends his messengers.
My word of power encircles all that which it may encircle,
my mouth envelops my word.
Do not carry off my word, O Crocodile!
I see thee;
thou art there waiting to take my word.
Thou hast a word of thine own, O Crocodile;
do not take my word!

Chapter XXXII I

Many serpents are there in the Underworld. Here is a spell for the soul to say, to keep the serpents from him:

O serpent Rekrek,
comest thou not near me!
Here is the god Geb!
Here is the god Shu!
Comest thou not near me,
or rats shall be thy food!
Comest thou not near me,
or the bones of a rotting cat shall be thy food!

Chapter LIX

During its journey in the Underworld, the soul must find water to drink and air to breathe. When the soul finds the sacred sycamore tree that creates water and wind, it says this prayer:

O sycamore of Nut!
O thou that createst water,
give me to drink of thee!
O thou that createst wind,
give me to breathe of thee!
Here am I, who dwelleth in Heracleopolis.
Here am I, guardian of the egg of the Great Cackler.

My strength is from the Egg.

My life is from the Egg.

My breath is from the Egg.

Chapter LXVIII

If the soul says this prayer, it will be able to travel between the land of the dead and the land of the living, and do so without taking harm:

Let the doors of Heaven be open for me;

let the doors of Earth be open for me.

Let Geb release his hold on me ;

let Geb who holds me in the earth open his arms for me.

Let the passageway between Life and Death be opened to me;

let it be opened so that I may go among the living as well as among the dead.

Give to me my heart, and my mouth;

give to me my arms, and my legs.

Give to me food and drink;

give to me air.

Give to me the offerings of my family;

let me hear their prayers for me.

Let me eat good bread made from grain grown along the Nile;

let me drink good beer made from grain grown along the Nile.

Let me have the shade of palm trees;

let me sit beneath the palms to shade me when the sun is high.

Let me be raised up, and let me sit and let me stand.

Let me call the wind to me, and let me taste it with my mouth.

Chapter LXXVII

If the soul wishes, it may transform itself into different beings. Sometimes it wishes to become a bird. Sometimes it wishes to become a lotus flower. Sometimes it even wishes to transform so that it might be a god.

I shall be far-seeing.

I shall be far-seeing, and I shall see as the Golden Hawk,
as the Golden Hawk that arises from the Egg.

Up I fly, up I fly as a Hawk with great wings,
with wings as great as a four-cubit span.

My wings are beautiful,

my wings are precious, even as green gems,
the gems that come from the South of Egypt.

I come out of the cabin of the Sektet Boat,

I rise up from the Eastern Hill .

I fly above the Matet Boat,
I fly and as a Hawk I stoop to the Matet Boat.
Those who see me bow down to me.
I spread my wings as a Golden Hawk,
a Golden Hawk with the head of a Heron.
I fold my wings as a Golden Hawk,
a Golden Hawk with the head of a Heron,
and Ra listens to my words.
Then I come into the midst of the company of gods.
I sit there, in the midst of the company of gods.
I see the fertile fields,
and all they produce.
I eat of the fruit of the fields,
and I am sated.
Osiris has given to me my throat,
my body and all that pertains to it is mine.

Chapter C

Finally, the soul comes to the place where the Barque of Millions of Years awaits, the boat in which travels the sun-god, Ra. The soul asks passage on the boat:

Let me take the divine Heron to the East.
Let me take Osiris to Tattu.
Let me open up the fountains of Hapi,
the fountains of the Nile.
Let me clear the path for the Sun,
a path for the Orb of the Sun on its journey.
Let me tow Seker on his sledge.
May I have strength for this task.
Worship I give to the Sun,
I am with those who worship the Orb of the Sun .
Let me be with Isis,
and may her favor be upon me
as it is upon all those whom she favors.
Let me take up my weapons,
let me stand against the enemy.
I will be victorious;
I will force the enemy to turn back.
Let Ra hold his hands out to me,
and may his Boatmen not prevent me.
Let my strength be that of the Eye of Ra,

and let the strength of the Eye of Ra be mine.

Chapter CXXV

When the soul arrives at the Hall of Righteousness, it addresses the gods. It tells the gods that it was virtuous in life and makes this confession:

Hail to thee, O Mighty Lord!

Hail to thee, whom I know.

I know also the Forty-Two Gods
who here are in this Hall.

I know their duty:

it is to devour the souls of the wicked.

They devour their souls

and drink their blood

at the Time of Reckoning before Osiris,

whose name is "The Pair of Eyes,"

and whose name is "Lord of Righteousness."

Here I stand before thee.

Here I am come to thee,

one who has done right,

one who has put a stop to wrong .

I have not done wrong to my fellows.

I have not slain my kinfolk.

I have not told lies.

I have not committed treason.

I have not done mischief.

I did not begin my days by taking more than was owed to me.

My name has not been made known to the god of the Barque.

I have not blasphemed.

I have not borne tales.

I have not slandered.

I have not done that which the gods have forbidden.

I have not disparaged a servant to his master.

I have not caused famine.

I have not caused weeping.

I gave no orders for murder.

I did not commit murder.

I have not caused suffering.

I have not taken from the temple offerings.

I have not stolen the food of the gods.

I have not stolen the food offered for the dead.

I have not committed adultery.
I have not stood unclean before the god of my land in his sanctuary.
I have not increased the grain's measure,
and neither have I diminished it.
I have not shortened the palm's length.
I have not cut short the measure of a field.
I have not tipped the scales by deceit.
I have not taken milk from infants .
I have not driven the cattle away from their grazing.
I have not snared birds that belong to the gods.
I have not caught fish that belong to the gods.
I have not stopped flowing water in its season.
I have not divided a flowing stream from its course.
I have not put out a lamp at a time when it should burn.
I have not held back sacrifices of cattle to the gods.
I have not taken the cattle that belong to the gods.
I have not prevented a god from coming forth.
I am pure, I am pure, I am pure, I am pure.
I am pure even as the Bennu Bird,
I am the Nose of the Lord of Air,
the one who breathes life into all living things.
I stand here on the day when the Eye is full in Annu,
on the last day of Mechir, when the floods recede,
in the presence of Osiris.
I see that the Eye is complete in Annu:
May no harm come to me here,
here where I stand in the Hall of Righteousness.
Let no harm come to me,
because I know the names of all the gods who are here.

Chapter CXXXVI

If the soul passes the test of righteousness, it is permitted to board the boat of Ra and ride with the god to paradise.

O Mighty Light!
O Light that rises in Babylon!
He is born,
the one who has a strong rope.
The moorings have been released ,
the boatman has the rudder in hand.
The divine machinery is ready,

I pull the cord that is above my head,
the cord that pulls the Barque along its course.
The Barque goes up into the heavens;
it takes me into the place of Nut.
I sail in the Barque like Ra.
I sail in the Barque like the Kaf.
I stop my journey at the Leg of Nut.
I stop my journey at the staircase
where Geb and Nut mourn.

Part II

Myths of the Great Gods

One of the better known Egyptian myths is that of Isis and Osiris. The most complete version of the myth is preserved not in Egyptian texts but in the writings of the Greek biographer Plutarch. However, surviving Egyptian writings indicate that Plutarch's version is very likely an accurate representation of the original Egyptian story of the dying and rising god and his wife's search for him. One such Egyptian source is the lament by Isis and Nephthys over the fragmented body of Osiris, which has been lightly incorporated.

Horus the Younger, the son of Isis and Osiris, was a god distinct from Horus the Elder, the son of Nut and Geb, although both were associated with the sun. The version of Horus' conception given here is not from Plutarch, but from an Egyptian hymn to Osiris.

Osiris, who was god of the Underworld, and his brother Set, who was a god of chaos and war, were traditional enemies. In these stories, Osiris is presented as the king of Egypt, and his brother Set as his murderer and usurper of the throne, which sets up a conflict between Set and Osiris' son, Horus. A myth copied in Thebes during the reign of Rameses V (1149-1145 BC), tells how Horus and Set brought suit against one another in order to determine who was the rightful heir to Osiris' throne. A separate story not retold here also exists detailing a series of combats between Set and Horus the Elder, wherein Horus acts as champion on behalf of Ra.

The Birth of Osiris

Nut, who is the sky, was the daughter of Tefnut, who is the light, and Shu, who is the air. Nut was the sister and spouse of Geb, who is the surface of the earth. Nut and Geb came together as man and wife, and soon Nut found herself with child. Within her were five children, gods waiting to be born.

Now, Ra saw that Geb loved Nut, and he was jealous. Ra laid a curse upon Nut, saying, "None of your children shall be born during any day of the year! "

Nut soon was in labor, but she could not deliver her children because of Ra's curse. Nut went to Thoth and begged him for his aid.

"I cannot turn back the curse of Ra," said Thoth. "No god has the power to do that. But I have thought of a ruse by which he may be tricked. Wait and see, and I will do what is in my power."

Thoth went to visit Khonsu, the god of the moon. He invited Khonsu to play at dice.

"I will play at dice with you," said Khonsu. "What are the stakes?"

"If I win, you will give me a fifth part of your light," said Thoth.

Khonsu laughed. He was sure that Thoth would never win.

"Done!" said Khonsu, and he played at dice with Thoth.

Khonsu played once with Thoth and lost and gave a fifth part of his light to Thoth as he had promised. He played a second time, and a third, and lost, and each time gave Thoth a fifth part of his light. He played a fourth time, and a fifth, and lost, and each time gave Thoth a fifth part of his light.

Then Khonsu said, "I will not play with you anymore. Luck is not with me today, and I shall soon have no light left!"

Thoth took the light that Khonsu had given him, and with it he created five extra days. In these five new days, Nut was able to have her children.

The first to be born was Osiris. The second to be born was Horus, who is called the Elder. The third to be born was Set, but he did not come into the world in the proper way: Set made a wound in his mother's side and entered the world through it. The next to be born was Isis, and after her, Nephthys. And thus was Nut delivered of all her children.

The standard Egyptian calendar had only 360 days, thus requiring five intercalary days be inserted in order to keep the calendar aligned with the seasons. (Our modern Leap Year Day is an example of an intercalary day, and serves exactly the same purpose.) Ra's curse evidently only applied to the standard 360-day year, and it is Thoth's trick that adds the five intercalary days needed for Nut to give birth.

The Tale of Isis and Osiris

Osiris and Isis were the children of Geb and Nut., and they became man and wife. Set and Nephthys also were children of Geb and Nut, and they also became man and wife.

Osiris became the ruler of the people, and Isis was his queen. Together they taught the people many important things. Osiris taught the people how to grow crops so that they might have food. He gave them laws that they might live rightly and solve their disputes fairly, and he taught them the worship of the gods. Isis instituted marriage among the people, that there might be families. She taught the women how to grind grain, how to spin flax, and how to weave cloth. Isis also knew much about medicine, and she taught this to the people as well, with the help of the god Thoth.

Now, even though Osiris and Isis had done much good work and had helped civilize many lands, there were still places that lived in lawlessness and poverty. Osiris looked out on these people and took pity on them, and from time to time he would make a journey to these

far lands to teach the people what he knew, so that they might also have abundant food, righteous laws, and give the gods the worship they were due. While Osiris was gone on these journeys, Isis ruled in his stead, a task that she did wisely and well.

Set was the brother of Osiris and Isis. Set saw the good that Osiris did and how the people venerated him in thanks for his gifts of knowledge, and Set grew greatly jealous. He desired the honor that Osiris had, and he thirsted after the power to rule all the places that Osiris held under his command. Set therefore devised a scheme to rid himself of his brother and take the throne for himself.

One day, when Osiris returned from one of his missions abroad, Set invited him to a feast in his honor. "Come to my house, brother," he said to Osiris, "for you have done much difficult and good work, and you deserve to eat a fine meal with all our family and friends so that we may give you the honor you deserve."

Osiris readily accepted the invitation, and when the time came, he went to the house of Set. There they ate a fine meal with many choice foods and much good beer and wine.

When the meal was over, Set brought out a large chest made of wood. It was inset with many gems and was richly carved and polished so that it shone and glittered. It was also the perfect size so that none but Osiris could fit inside it.

"Friends!" said Set. "Behold, I have made this chest of wood, richly carved and adorned with gems. I wish to make it a gift to the person who can fit inside it exactly. Who among you would like to try his luck?"

One by one, the guests climbed inside the chest. But some guests were too tall, others too short, and none fit the measurements of the chest exactly. Osiris hung back from the sport. He had no real interest in the chest for he already had many beautiful things like it and he did not need another. But upon Set's urging, and because the other guests wished him to join in, Osiris climbed inside the chest and lay down. The chest fit him perfectly, having been made to his own measurements.

Osiris thought to get up out of the chest and take it home as his prize, but before he could do so, Set snatched up the lid and slammed it down upon the chest. Then he took up a hammer and nails and nailed it shut. Set and the other guests, who were naught but Set's own followers, picked up the chest, ran out of the banquet hall with it, and threw it into the Nile. The chest floated away on the waters of the river and out into the wide sea .

Soon word came to Isis of what had been done to her husband. Isis put on clothes of mourning. She cut her hair. She left the palace and

walked the length and breadth of Egypt, all the while asking whether anyone had seen the chest containing her husband's body, but none could answer her, until one day a group of children said they had seen it floating by. Isis went the way the children told her and found that the chest had washed ashore in the far land of Byblos, where it came to rest against a young cypress tree. In the many years that it rested there while Isis searched for it, the tree grew, and soon its trunk encompassed the whole of the chest inside it. Not knowing what was inside it, the king of Byblos had cut down the tree, for it was both wide and tall, and used it for a pillar in his new palace.

Isis came to Byblos and learned what had become of the tree containing her husband's body. She went to the palace and, hiding her divinity, found work as a nursemaid to one of the queen's infant sons so that she could find a way to get the pillar back. Now, when Isis cared for the baby, she did not nurse him the way a human mother would do. Thinking to make the child immortal, she gave him her finger to suck and at night laid him in the fire so that his human parts would be burned away and all that would be left would be the immortal ones. While the baby was in the flames, Isis would turn herself into a swallow and fly around the pillar that contained the chest that held Osiris' body. One night, the queen came in and was horrified to find her child burning merrily away in the fire and frightened when the swallow, who had been darting to and fro, changed itself into the form of the nursemaid. Isis therefore was unable to finish the transformation of the baby so he had to remain mortal.

After this, Isis obviously could no longer hide her divine nature from the king and queen. She asked them to show her which was the pillar that came from the tree containing Osiris' body and demanded that they give it to her. The king gladly complied. Isis cut the pillar open, revealing the chest that held her beloved husband. When Isis beheld the chest that held her husband's body, she let out a piercing shriek of grief so terrifying that the infant prince died from the shock.

Wanting her gone from his court for killing his son, the king of Byblos gave Isis a ship to sail back to Egypt with the chest, sending his elder son to help her. The water of the river soon became rough because of the wind. Isis feared that the chest would be washed overboard and lost forever, so she dried up the river. Isis took the chest from the ship and laid it on the ground. Opening it and beholding the face of her beloved Osiris, she once again was overcome with grief and began to wail. The prince of Byblos wondered what it was that caused Isis to weep so and went to see what it was. But when the prince looked upon the face of Isis in her grief, it was so terrifying that he died on the spot.

Now, the reason for Isis' great grief was that she had not yet borne Osiris a son so she decided to come to the body of her husband in the form of a bird and by magic make herself with child. She then hid the chest with the body in it and went to another place .

One day, Set was out hunting, and he chanced upon the chest. Although Osiris was clearly dead inside it, Set wanted to make sure he would never be challenged by his brother again, so he cut the body into fourteen pieces and scattered them throughout Egypt.

When Isis discovered her husband's body was missing, she set out on a journey to find it. She looked high and low for him, and one by one she came across the pieces of his body. Instead of burying them, Isis kept them, thinking that she could reunite the pieces of her husband's body and thus bring him back to life. But she knew that Set might find out what she was doing so to put him off the trail, for each piece she found, she held a funeral and set up a stele, making it look as though the pieces had been buried. Each of these tombs would one day become a temple dedicated to Osiris.

Isis was able to find thirteen of the pieces, but the fourteenth she could not find. The fourteenth piece was her husband's male member, which had been devoured by a fish. When she had gathered all the pieces together, she began to wail over the broken body of her husband. Nephthys learned of what Isis was doing and joined her in mourning the dead Osiris. The women lamented loudly together, and Ra heard their cries. He sent Anubis and Thoth to help them.

Working together, the gods and goddesses took the remaining pieces of Osiris' body and sewed them together. By magic, Isis created for Osiris a new male member and attached that to his body. Then they anointed the body with precious oils and wrapped it in strips of linen. This was the first time the rites of embalmment were performed. Once Osiris was in his wrappings, Isis transformed herself into a bird. She flapped her wings mightily, forcing air into the nostrils of Osiris until he took a great breath. In this way was Osiris restored to life.

But Osiris was not truly alive. He had been dead and was no longer a living creature. He therefore no longer felt at home among the living, even with his beloved wife and their newborn son, who was named Horus. Osiris therefore descended into the Underworld, where he became the god of the dead.

With Osiris' second disappearance and Horus only a baby, Set felt emboldened to keep the throne of Egypt. He was a bad ruler, and the people suffered under him. Isis knew that she and her baby were in danger from the wicked Set. She took up the baby Horus and fled with him into the marshes where the papyrus reeds grow. It was the only hope she had of protecting Horus from his uncle until he was grown

enough to take back the throne.

The Lament of Isis and Nephthys

Isis hid with the baby Horus in the papyrus swamp. Osiris had been raised from the dead, but he had gone to the Underworld to rule the Dead there, so the evil Set had taken the throne of Egypt. Under Set, Egypt became a lawless place. Thieves and murderers worked their will as they desired and were not brought to justice. The crops withered and the people suffered. But still Horus was not strong enough to contend with his uncle, so Isis hid with him in the swamp .

Because of her exile, Isis had no choice except to go begging to get food and other needs for herself and her child. Every day, she would hide the baby Horus in the reeds and go into the neighboring villages to see what she might get from the people there. Now, the wicked Set knew that Isis and Horus were hiding in the swamp, but he knew not where. And because of the magic spells of protection that Isis had laid upon the swamp, he could not enter the place in his own body. So, Set waited until Isis left the swamp to go begging, then transformed himself into a serpent. He went slithering and swimming through the waters and reeds searching for the baby Horus that he knew must be hidden there. After a time, he came upon the baby Horus. Swiftly he attacked, striking the child with a venomous bite, then slithered out of the swamp as quickly as he could. Resuming his own form, Set returned to his palace, rejoicing to think that finally he had secured the throne once and for all.

Isis returned from her begging to find the infant Horus writhing on the ground. He was sweating with fever and frothing at the mouth. The venom from Set's bite was working its way through his little body. Isis was distraught. She knew that if she could not reverse the poison soon, her son would die. Isis cried out, calling for help as loudly as she could. Soon, some nearby farmers and fishermen came to her aid.

"What is wrong?" asked the people.

"My son has been bitten by a venomous serpent, and he will die of the poison," said Isis.

The farmers and fishermen consulted among themselves, but none of them could think of a medicine or a magic spell that would be able to cure little Horus. Feeling sad that they could not help, the people returned to their work.

Isis held her baby's shivering body, trying to comfort him. "Be not afraid, O Horus, my son. I will not let you die from this poison. You are the son of a god; you are descended from the great god Geb who is the earth, and he from the great god Shu who holds up the sky, and all come from Atum, the maker of all that is. This venom shall not be your ending."

Isis cried out to the mighty Ra for help. “Behold, O Ra, the child Horus, a god. He has been bitten by a vile serpent. The poison racks his body. Send us your aid that he might live.”

Nephthys, the wife of Set and sister of Isis, heard Isis’ lament. Nephthys hurried to the swamp to see how she might help Isis and the baby Horus.

Nephthys said, “I know what we might do to save Horus. Pray to the boatmen of Ra. Pray that they stop the boat in the middle of the sky. Pray that they hold the boat there, the Barque of Millions of Years, the boat of the sun, until the poison is gone from Horus’ body, until he is cured and well.”

Isis did as Nephthys told her. She prayed to the boatmen, and they heard her prayer. When they were directly overhead, they stopped the boat and held it there. As soon as the boat stopped moving, the light of the sun went out. The darkness over the earth was deep and complete .

Now, the god Thoth had been riding in the boat, and when it stopped he went down to where Isis was sitting, cradling the baby Horus, Nephthys at her side.

“What has happened, O Isis, that you cause the sun to stop in its course and darkness fall upon the land?” said Thoth.

“My son has been bitten by an evil serpent, by Set in the form of a snake. The venom courses through my son’s body, and I know not how to cure him,” said Isis.

“But you are possessed of strong magic, and you know much about medicines and healing,” said Thoth.

“I am and I do,” said Isis, “but nothing that I have or know can draw out this venom. And I will not let the Barque of Millions of Years move on from this place until my son has been healed. All will remain in darkness until my son is whole and well again.”

Thoth then spoke a powerful magic spell over the body of Horus. The poison vanished from the baby’s body, and he was cured. Thoth went back up into the Barque of Millions of Years, and the sun once again started its journey across the sky. Day and night resumed their customary rhythm, and the baby Horus soon grew into a powerful young god, ready to challenge his uncle and avenge the wrong that had been done to his father, Osiris.

The Battle of Horus and Set

When Horus was a full-grown god, he came before the court of the gods and asked that he be restored to the throne of his father, Osiris. Horus laid his argument before Ra-Horakhty, Lord of All Things, saying that he should be king, since he was the rightful heir and Set

but a foul usurper.

Shu that holds up the sky, the son of Ra, said, "It is right that Horus should enter into his inheritance as king."

Thoth who is the word and intelligence of the gods agreed. "It is right a million times that Horus should be king," he said. "Let this thing be done!"

The Lord of All Things then instructed Thoth to take ink, pen, and papyrus and write a letter to Osiris to see what his opinion of the matter was. And the letter that Thoth wrote was this:

To Osiris, the great Bull and Lion, King of All Egypt, from Ra-Horakhty, the Nine Gods, and the court of all the gods, greetings and wishes for much joy and prosperity to thee. Thy son, Horus, hath appeared before the court of the gods to claim the throne of All Egypt against King Set. Thus, the court of the gods desireth thy counsel in this matter that we may judge rightly between them, with full knowledge of these affairs .

The letter was taken to Osiris where he sat on the throne of the Underworld. Osiris opened it and read it, and then he commanded his own scribe to take ink, pen, and papyrus to write this reply to the court of the gods:

To the Lord of All Things, to the Nine Gods, and to the court of the gods who rule over the earth and its peoples, from Osiris, who sitteth upon the throne of the Underworld and who in life was rightful king of All Egypt, greetings. I ask you, who was it that first taught the growing of crops for food, of the use of barley and emmer for people and gods and cattle? It was I, Osiris, and none other, who did that thing, and Horus is my son and rightful heir. The wicked Set who sitteth upon the throne of Egypt is a vile usurper and murderer. If the court of the gods wisheth to do right, they will restore the throne to Horus.

The messenger of Osiris came before the court of the gods and gave this letter to Ra-Horakhty. Ra-Horakhty opened the letter and read it to the assembled gods, saying, "Osiris wishes the throne be given to his son, Horus."

Shu that holds up the sky said, "This seems well and right. Let Horus be king."

Thoth that is the word and intelligence of the gods said, "This is right a million times! Let it be done as Osiris says."

When Horus' mother Isis heard the letter and the statements of Shu and Thoth, she let out a shout of jubilation, thinking that surely her son would soon be king over all Egypt, as was his father before him.

Onuris added his voice to those favoring Horus. "Let the cartouche of Horus be drawn up and let him bear the White Crown!"

Then Set spoke to the assembled gods. "What need is there of the word of Osiris in this matter? Let me and this young pretender take it up between us in single combat and discover by force of arms which of us is to be king."

To this Thoth answered, "What need is there of the word of Osiris, say you? I say that as long as Horus, the heir of his body lives and draws breath, that it is right that the heir should have the throne and none other."

Ra-Horakhty listened to the words of the gods and was secretly angry because the other gods claimed the throne for Horus without first hearing what he, the Lord of All Things, had to say. Finally, Ra-Horakhty spoke to the assembly. "What right have you to make this decision and to say which of them is to bear the crown of Egypt? Am I not the Lord of All Things? Should not my thought be heard in this?" For although Ra-Horakhty acknowledged Horus as the son of Osiris, he truly wished Set to remain king, for he was a seasoned ruler while Horus was a mere youth.

Upon hearing Ra-Horakhty's anger, Onuris cried out, "What are we to do then? "

Atum thought for a moment and then said, "Let us send for the god Banebdjede, who dwells in the island of Sehel in the First Cataract, and have him be the judge between these two."

So they sent to Sehel for Banebdjede, and soon he arrived at the court of the gods where they asked him to judge between Horus and Set. Banebdjede said, "I would not decide in ignorance. Let us send a letter to Neith, the Great Mother, and ask her what she would have us do."

The Nine Gods agreed that this was good counsel and should be done. They directed Thoth to write a letter to Neith. Thoth took ink, pen, and papyrus, writing the letter thus:

From Ra-Horakhty, Lord of All Things, from the Nine Gods, and the court of the gods, to Neith, the Great Divine Mother who was at the beginning of all that is, greetings. Know thou that it is our intent to judge whom should rule Egypt, Set or Horus, and we desire thy wise counsel in this matter. Tellest thou us which of these we should choose as king.

Neith read the letter from Ra-Horakhty, the Nine Gods, and the court of the gods, and she sent back this answer:

Stop playing these silly games and do what is right, or I, Neith, the Divine Mother of Creation, shall cause the sky to fall upon your heads! Give the throne to Horus, for he is surely the heir of Osiris. But you, Ra-Horakhty, Lord of All Things, also

*double the possessions of Set and give to him your daughters
Anat and Astoreth as compensation. Make Horus the king!*

When Neith's reply arrived at the court of the gods, Thoth read it out to the assembly. The gods were pleased with this answer, and it seemed right to them, so they shouted together, "Let this be done! Neith is wise and just. Let Horus be made king!"

Ra-Horakhty became angrier than ever that the other gods favored Horus over Set. The Lord of All Things turned on Horus and said, "What makes you think you can be king? You are weak, and your breath smells bad. Ruling Egypt is a task too big for a mere boy like you."

When the other gods heard what Ra-Horakhty said to Horus, they were enraged. The god Baba told mighty Ra-Horakhty that he had no honor and no wisdom. Even though the Nine Gods were very angry at Ra-Horakhty, they were shocked by Baba's insolence and told him that he had done wrong and should go home. Then the court broke up, and everyone went home to their own tents, peevish and discontented.

Ra-Horakhty also went into his tent where he lay down. He had a bad headache, and his heart was sore from Baba's insult and from all that had been said and done at the court. He lay there for a time, waiting for the bad feelings to pass. Soon his daughter Hathor came to him, hoping to cheer him up so that he might reconvene the council to make a decision. She went into Ra-Horakhty's tent where she took off her shift and showed her nakedness to the Lord of All Things. This made Ra-Horakhty very happy, so he went out of his tent and called the Nine Gods and the court of the gods to him, and also bade Horus and Set come before the court once again.

"One thing we have not done," said Ra-Horakhty, "is to hear from the contenders their own proof of why they should be king. Therefore, I command them to lay their arguments before this court that we may judge them fairly."

Set was the first to speak. "I am Set, the strongest of all the gods. I am stronger even than the Nine put together, because I sit in the prow of the Barque of Millions of Years and each day I slay Apophis, the great Serpent who is the enemy of Ra. None of you here could ever do that. This is why I deserve to be king."

Hearing this, the court of the gods exclaimed, "This is a true thing that Set has said. He is strongest of all. He should be king."

But Onuris and Thoth disagreed. "Set is not the heir of Osiris! He has no claim to the throne! Horus is the rightful son of Osiris, and he should be king."

Banebdjedete countered the argument of Onuris and Thoth, saying, "Why should we give the throne to a mere stripling, when Set, a king

of mature years and experience, might have the rule?"

Then Ra-Horakhty muttered something, but no one could understand the words. This angered the Nine Gods who demanded to know what he had said, but Ra would not tell them.

Horus had listened to all that had been said in the court. He felt betrayed by the gods shifting their favor to Set. Horus said, "How can you justify taking my throne from me and giving it to Set? I alone am the heir to Osiris; I alone am rightful king of all Egypt!"

Isis also was furious. She said, "By the great goddess Neith and by Ptah-Tatanen, these matters should be submitted to the judgement of the great Atum who is in Heliopolis, and also before Khepera who rides in his barque. Let them decide!"

The Nine Gods heard the oath of Isis and said to her, "Yes, that is wise. We should have Atum and Khepera judge this matter. Let us go to Heliopolis and hear what they have to say."

Set couldn't believe his ears. He had thought that the court of the gods finally supported him for the throne, where they had favored Horus earlier, and now they had decided to take further counsel from other gods.

Set roared, "I shall take my giant scepter and I shall kill each of you, one by one! One each day!" Then he gained control of himself and said, "Fine. We shall submit to the judgement of Atum and Khepera at Heliopolis. But I shall not attend any court that allows Isis within its walls!"

The gods set out for Heliopolis and took the ferry to the island that stands in the midst of the waters there. Ra-Horakhty went to the ferryman, Nemty, and told him, "Ferry over all the gods who come for passage, but do not let any woman who looks like Isis cross the waters. Isis is not welcome at the court. "

Isis heard what Ra-Horakhty had told Nemty, so she changed herself into the shape of an old crone, wrinkled and bent with age, carrying a fine cake. She hobbled over to the ferry landing and showed Nemty the cake. "Ferry me across," she said, "for I bring this cake to the lad who herds the cattle on the island, and he needs his food."

"I will not take you across," said Nemty, "for the great Ra-Horakhty has told me not to ferry women across this day."

Isis held out the cake to the ferryman. "See this fine cake? I will give it to you if you take me across."

Nemty scoffed at Isis. "What do I care for cake? Keep it, Mother, and eat it yourself, for I will not ferry you."

Then Isis took the signet ring off her finger. It was a fine gold ring and very precious. She showed it to the ferryman.

"Take me across, and this signet ring shall be yours," she said.

Swayed, Nemty took the ring and ferried Isis across the river to the island.

Knowing that she was unwelcome at the court, Isis disguised herself as a beautiful young maiden. She walked up the slope of the island towards the pavilion that had been set for the gods to take their meal together. Isis approached the pavilion in such a way that only Set saw her. Set was inflamed with desire for this beautiful young maiden, not realizing that it was Isis in disguise. Isis caught his eye and then hid herself behind a sycamore tree, hoping to lure him to herself.

Set excused himself to Ra-Horakhty and the other gods. He went over to the sycamore tree where he found the beautiful maiden waiting for him. Set said, "I am here, O Beautiful One!"

Isis said, "First I must ask you a thing, O Mighty Set."

"Ask," said Set.

"I once had a husband who owned many head of cattle," said Isis. "Together we had a fine son. My husband died and our son began caring for the cattle. But a stranger came to us, and he threatened our son, saying, 'Your cattle are mine; I shall beat you and take from you all you have.' Please, O Mighty Set, will you be our champion and settle this matter for us?"

"Certainly," said Set. "For no one should steal your husband's cattle if his son and heir is still living and able to care for them."

"Aha!" cried Isis, as she turned herself into a kite, flying up onto a tree branch. "Out of your own mouth you condemn yourself!"

Set realized that he had been tricked, and he was ashamed. Humiliated, he walked back to the pavilion where Ra-Horakhty and the other gods were finishing their meal. Ra-Horakhty saw Set and noticed that something was wrong.

"What is the matter?" asked Ra-Horakhty.

Set told Ra-Horakhty the story about the cattle that Isis had told him and how Isis had asked him to settle the matter for her.

"I see," said Ra-Horakhty. "And what was your answer to her request?"

"I agreed that the son should not be deprived of his inheritance by a stranger."

"Oh," said Ra-Horakhty. "That is bad. You yourself have made this judgement in favor of the son and heir. What do you want now?"

"Bring the ferryman Nemty here to be judged," said Set. "He was told not to bring any women to the island, and he disobeyed your order. It is because of his disobedience that I am now shamed."

The Nine Gods ordered Nemty to be brought before them. In punishment for his disobedience, they chopped off his toes. From that

day forward, Nemty avoided gold, saying that his greatest misfortune came because of that precious thing and he wanted no more of either. Then the Nine Gods told Nemty to take them from the island to the western bank of the river, while Ra-Horakhty and Atum remained behind. The Nine Gods went up the side of the mountain, and there they sat, talking together.

Evening came. Ra-Horakhty and Atum saw that the Nine Gods were sitting idle, so they composed a letter to them:

What are you doing lying about and not deciding this case? Are you going to make Set and Horus wait forever for your judgement? This letter is our instruction that you should crown Horus, son of Osiris, with the White Crown and make him king of all Egypt!

When Set heard this, he was furious. The Nine Gods said to him, "Why are you angry? We have here the judgement of Atum and of Ra-Horakhty. We must do as it says." So, the Nine Gods took the White Crown and placed it on the head of Horus, making him king of all Egypt.

Set roared in anger. "How is it that the crown is given to the younger brother when the elder is still here? Remove the White Crown from the head of Horus! Let him be thrown into the water! Let us contend to see who shall be king!"

Ra-Horakhty heard Set's cry and agreed that there should be a contest between Set and Horus.

Set said to Horus, "Let us turn ourselves into hippopotamuses and then go under the water. Whoever surfaces first before the end of three months shall be the loser."

Horus agreed, so they turned themselves into hippopotamuses and dove beneath the water.

Isis saw this and became greatly afraid. She was sure her son would be killed. Isis made a harpoon, sharp and deadly. She threw it into the water as hard as she could, but instead of hitting Set, it pierced Horus' hide instead.

Horus cried out in pain. "Mother! Why have you done this? Take the harpoon out of my hide!"

Isis pulled the harpoon out as fast as she could. Then she threw it into the water again, this time hitting Set.

Set cried out, wounded by the bite of the sharp harpoon. "Sister! Why have you done this to me? I am your brother, Set! Take the harpoon out of my hide!"

Isis couldn't help but hear her brother's cries. She felt sorry for him and removed the harpoon.

When Horus saw that Isis was helping Set, he became enraged out of his mind. Leaping out of the water, he took up his great knife and cut off his mother's head. Taking his mother's head in his arms, he went up the mountain with it. Isis, meanwhile, transformed her body into a headless statue.

Ra-Horakhty came to the place where the statue of Isis stood. "Who is this statue that has no head?" he asked.

"That is a statue of Isis," said Thoth.

"Why has it no head?" asked the Lord of All Things.

Thoth explained what had happened between Horus and Isis and that Horus had taken his mother's head up the mountain with him.

Ra-Horakhty was astonished by this. He turned to the Nine Gods and cried, "Let us go find Horus! We must punish him for the wrong he has done to Isis!"

So, the Nine Gods went up the mountain as Ra-Horakhty commanded and began looking for Horus.

Set especially wanted to be the one to find Horus so that he could defeat him once and for all. After a time, Set found Horus sleeping under a tree. Straddling Horus' body, Set plucked out his eyes and buried them on the mountainside where they became lotus bulbs. Soon two lotus flowers were blooming in the place where Set had buried the eyes. That done, Set went back down the mountain to where Ra-Horakhty was waiting for the searchers to return.

"Did you find Horus?" asked Ra-Horakhty.

Set lied to the Lord of All Things. "No," he said, "I did not see him at all."

Some time later, the goddess Hathor came across Horus where he sat weeping over his injuries. Taking pity on him, Hathor went into the desert and captured a gazelle. She milked the gazelle and took the milk back to where Horus was sitting.

"Open your eyes," said Hathor, "and let me pour this milk in them."

Horus did as Hathor told him. She put some milk first in the left eye, then in the right. When this was done, Horus found that he was healed and could see again.

Hathor went to Ra-Horakhty. "I found Horus," she said. "He had been blinded, but I healed him. Look, here he is now."

Then the Nine Gods said, "Horus and Set! You are commanded to appear before us to be judged."

Horus and Set stood before the Nine Gods and Ra-Horakhty. The Lord of All Things said, "You shall do what I command. Go from here. Have a meal. Stop fighting with each other. Let there be peace!"

Set turned to Horus. "Will you be my guest at my home for a

banquet?"

Horus said, "Yes, I will."

Set and Horus went to Set's house where they ate a good meal together. Soon it was evening.

Set asked Horus, "Will you sleep here in my house?"

"Yes, I will," replied Horus.

Set caused a bed to be made for Horus. Horus laid down upon it and went to sleep. Sometime in the night, Set came to Horus as a man comes to a woman, thinking to cause him shame. Horus pushed Set away, but not before some of Set's seed had fallen into Horus' hands. Horus went to Isis and showed her Set's seed.

"Look, Mother!" cried Horus. "Look what Set has done to me!"

Isis cried out. She took a knife, cut off Horus' hands, and threw them in the river. Then she gave Horus new, clean hands.

Isis said to her son, "We must pay Set back for this insult. Collect for me some of your seed and give it to me. I know what must be done."

Horus did what his mother asked and gave her a vessel with some of his seed in it. Isis went to Set's house and found the vegetable garden. Isis asked the gardener working there, "Which of these vegetables does Set eat every day?"

The gardener answered, "I never see him eat anything but the lettuce."

When the gardener wasn't looking, Isis poured Horus' seed on the lettuce. Later that day, Set ate the lettuce, not noticing that it had Horus' seed on it.

Set went to Horus, saying, "We still have not settled our differences. Come, let us go to court and argue our claims."

Horus agreed. They went before the Nine Gods to present their cases.

Set said, "I should be the ruler of all Egypt. I am strongest. I am the eldest. And besides, I lay with Horus last night as lovers do, and he let me do it!"

The Nine Gods cried out. They spat at Horus in disgust.

Then Horus said, "I swear by the great god Ra-Horakhty, Lord of All Things, that what the usurper Set says is false and I can prove it! Call to the seed of Set and see where it is now!"

The god Thoth, who is the word and intelligence of the gods, went to Horus. He put his hand on Horus' shoulder and called out, "Come out, seed of Set! Show us where you are!"

The seed of Set answered from the water. "Here I am!"

Thoth went to Set next. He put his hand on Set's shoulder and called out, "Come out, seed of Horus! Show us where you are!"

A voice from inside Set said, "From where shall I come out?"

“Come out from his ear,” said Thoth.

“But I am divine seed,” said the seed of Horus. “Why should I come out from a lowly place like the ear?”

“Come out from the top of Set’s head then,” said Thoth.

Slowly a light began to glow over the top of Set’s head, and soon a disk appeared there, a glowing sun-disk. Set was furious. He reached for the sun-disk, but Thoth took it away and put it atop his own head.

Then the Nine Gods said, “We have seen the truth of this. Horus is right. Set is wrong.”

Angered, Set made an oath by the great Lord of All Things. “This shall not be decided until Horus contends with me and one of us emerges the victor. I propose that we build boats of stone. The one whose boat floats shall be the victor. The one whose boat sinks shall be the loser. Let it be decided this way!”

The Nine Gods agreed that this should be done. Horus went to a secret place where no one could see him work. He built a boat out of wood and covered it with plaster made to look like stone. Set went to a nearby mountain. He cut off the top of the mountain and fashioned it into a boat. In the morning, the Nine Gods summoned Horus and Set to the river to launch their boats. No one guessed that Horus’ boat was made of wood and plaster. Horus pushed his boat into the water where it floated. Set pushed his boat into the water, and it sank immediately.

Set became enraged. He turned himself into a hippopotamus and attacked the boat of Horus. Soon it was nothing more than scraps of wood and plaster floating along the river. Then it was Horus’ turn to be angry. He took up his spear and threw it at Set, piercing his hide.

The Nine Gods told Horus, “Do not throw your spear at Set.”

Horus went and got himself another boat. He sailed down the river to Sais, home of the goddess Neith.

“Great Mother Nieth!” said Horus. “For eighty years now have I fought Set in court. Every time I go up against him, I am found to be in the right. Everyone says that I should be the heir of Osiris. But after all this time, I still have not won my case. I still have not been made king. The Nine Gods and the court of the gods do not know how to judge rightly!”

But Horus received no answer from Neith.

At the court of the gods, it was once again deemed proper to write a letter to Osiris asking for his opinion on the matter. Thoth wrote the letter, and it was sent to Osiris. Not long after, the gods received Osiris’ reply. It was the same as before:

Horus is my rightful heir. Let him be made king forthwith! I, Osiris, who taught the growing of barley and emmer, say this!

Osiris' letter was read aloud to all the gods, and to Ra-Horakhty who was presiding over the court.

"Ha!" cried Ra-Horakhty, upon hearing the letter. "Let a reply be sent to Osiris. Let it say, 'Barley and emmer would still be here, even if you had never existed and even if you had never taught anyone how to grow it.'"

When Osiris read Ra-Horakhty's reply, he wrote his own letter in response:

O Lord of All Things, many are your great works. You made the Nine Gods to rule over creation. But justice is gone from your realm. Justice has died and gone down to the Underworld, and that now is among your accomplishments. Now listen to me, all you gods. I have messengers, answerable only to me. If I send them forth to gather the hearts of evildoers, if I send them forth to gather the hearts of those who will not deal justly, they will go out at my word. They will collect the hearts of the unjust and bring them to me. Here I am in the west of the world. Here is my realm while all of you are outside. But did not the mighty Ptah when he created the stars make them to come west into my realm to take their rest? Do not all who live come to my realm at the end? Who among you is mightier than I am?

Osiris' letter arrived at the court of the gods. Thoth opened it and read it aloud to Ra-Horakhty, the Nine Gods, and the whole court of the gods.

Upon hearing Osiris' words, the Nine Gods said, "Surely the great Osiris is correct twice over in what he has said."

But Set still was not satisfied. He said, "Let us go to the island in the middle of the river. There I will contend with Horus."

Set went to the island, but the other gods had already decided that Horus should wear the crown. Atum turned to Isis. "Go to the island," he said, "and fetch Set back here in chains."

Isis did as Atum commanded. When she arrived back at the court with Set, Atum said to him, "Why have you fought so with Horus? Why do you seek to keep the throne that you have taken from him?"

Set said, "But I have done no such thing. Summon Horus, son of Isis and Osiris, to the court. Let him be made king!"

Horus was brought before Ra-Horakhty, the Nine Gods, and the court of the gods. He was crowned with the White Crown and given the throne of his father, Osiris.

The gods acclaimed him saying, "Hail, O King Horus! Hail to the good king of all Egypt! May you rule wisely and well, for ever and ever!"

Isis rejoiced. She cried out to her son, "Hail, O King Horus! Hail, my

son and king of all Egypt! May the earth be always bright with your glory!”

The mighty Ptah then addressed Ra-Horakhty, the Nine Gods, and the court of all the gods, saying, “What shall be done with Set, now that Horus has been crowned and this matter concluded?”

Ra-Horakhty answered, “Let Set come and live with me as my son. He will cause thunder in the sky, and all shall fear him.”

Ra-Horakhty, after having answered Ptah’s question, turned back to the celebration at hand, rejoicing at the crowning of Horus. He said to the Nine Gods, “Shout and rejoice! Rejoice for Horus, son of Isis and Osiris! Rejoice for the king of all Egypt, for him who wears the White Crown!”

Then Isis said, “Horus is king! May there be prosperity in the land. The Nine Gods rejoice and hold a feast in his honor. The court is bedecked with garlands in his honor. The Nine Gods exult and the whole land rejoices that Horus is their king. Horus now holds the office of his father, the mighty Osiris, as is right and just!”

How Isis Learned Ra’s Secret Holy Name

Ra was the creator of all things, of animals and birds, plants and fish. Every day, he marched across the sky from east to west, looking out onto the lands that he had made. But he had grown old, and he dribbled from his mouth, his spittle falling down onto the ground.

The goddess Isis watched Ra as he walked his daily path across the sky. She thought to herself, “If Ra has grown so old and so weak that his spittle dribbles upon the ground, perhaps I might trick him into telling me his secret divine name. If I but knew that name, I would have his power and that would make me the supreme goddess of all that is.”

The next day, Isis waited until Ra had passed by her. As at other times, Ra’s spittle fell upon the ground. Isis went to the place where the spittle had fallen, and she mixed it with the dust of the earth. From this mixture, Isis created a serpent, fanged and venomous. She took the serpent and set it down upon the path that Ra would tread the next day.

Morning came, and Ra set out upon his walk across the sky. Ra, however, did not see the serpent where it lay in his path, and as he stepped over it, the serpent bit him on his ankle. The venom coursed through Ra’s body. The pain was like nothing he had ever felt. He screamed so loudly and so ferociously that all the gods of Heaven gathered around him, asking what was wrong.

But Ra was in such agony that his teeth were chattering and for a time

he could not answer them. Finally, he managed to say, "I was walking my daily walk across the sky and something bit me. I do not know what it is. I am the creator of all things and I did not set this in my path. I cannot change what it has done to me and I cannot heal my wound from it because it is a thing I have not made. Never before has my body suffered so grievously."

Isis saw that her plan was working. She went to Ra and, pretending not to know what happened, said, "Has a serpent bitten you, O Mighty Ra? Perhaps I could make a spell to cure its bite. Tell me what ails you."

Ra said, "It is neither fire nor water, but I burn like fire and am cold like water. My body sweats and my body shakes. I am trembling so badly that I cannot see properly."

Isis said, "If I am to cure you, I will need to know your secret holy name. A person is only cured by saying their true name."

Ra said, "I am he that made the heavens and the earth. I brought up the mountains and made all the things that live upon the earth. I made the waters and all that dwell within them. I made the heavens and stretched them over the two horizons. I made the gods and gave them the souls within them. It is I who put the light of day into the eye, and it is I who cause the coming of darkness when the eye is closed. The Nile must flood at my command. I am the maker of time, of hours and days. It is I who declare the festivals of the year. Fire also have I created. I am Khepera in the morning, Ra at noon, and Atum in the evening."

But nothing that Ra said could drive out the poison because he had not said his own true name.

Isis repeated to Ra, "If you tell me your secret holy name, you will be cured. That is how I will be able to heal you. Tell me your name."

Ra writhed in agony. The pain of the venom was like fire in all the parts of his body. Finally, he could bear it no more said to Isis, "I will tell you my name."

Ra hid himself away from the other gods, for he did not want them to know what he was doing. Ra sent his name secretly from his own breast into that of Isis, binding her with an oath that she never reveal that name to anyone but her son Horus.

Isis exulted at knowing Ra's true secret name. She called Horus to herself and told him that Ra had promised to give him his eyes.

Once that was done, Isis said, "Come out, poison! Come out of the body of Ra, come out of the Eye of Horus!"

The poison came out of Ra and he was healed .

And that is how Isis came to know the secret holy name of mighty Ra and to give it to her son, Horus.

This story is apparently intended to illustrate how Horus became a solar god. Knowing the true name of a person was thought to be a way to take or convey power from one person to another: thus when Horus knows Ra's true name, he partakes of Ra's power. Also, the giving of the eyes of Ra to Horus is a way of showing the transfer of solar powers from one to the other, since the Eye of Ra was a personification of the sun.

Part III

Political Myths

The myth of the creation of Hatshepsut, a female pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty, is unusual in that the traditional story of the creation of a pharaoh by the gods was usually intended to legitimize the rule of a male king. The daughter of Pharaoh Thutmose I, Hatshepsut did not ascend the throne by right of birth—which would have been impossible for her as a woman—but rather at the death of her husband, Pharaoh Thutmose II. Her stepson, Thutmose III, was not old enough to rule when his father died, and so by tradition Hatshepsut was made regent. But instead of simply ruling in the stead of her young son, she decided to take the throne and rule in her own right, which she did from c. 1479 to c. 1458 BC. This story is one of the means by which she attempted to consolidate power as pharaoh.

The Birth of Queen Hatshepsut

The great god Amen-Ra called together his council. The court of the gods came together at his call and sat gathered about the mighty Amen-Ra. On his right were Osiris and his wife Isis, along with their sister Nephthys and their son Horus. Hathor and Anubis were also seated amongst these gods. On Amen-Ra's left were Atum and Ment, along with Geb and his wife, and their children, Shu and Tefnut.

Amen-Ra said to the court of the gods, "Behold, I shall bring forth a great Queen, a mighty ruler, who shall have sway over all the lands. She shall rule over Egypt. She shall rule over Nubia. She shall rule over Punt and over Syria. But first we must find a woman worthy to be a mother to one so powerful."

As Amen-Ra spoke these things, an ibis flew into the court. The ibis landed before the throne of Amen-Ra and transformed itself into the god Thoth.

Thoth said, "O great Amen-Ra, I know of such a woman, a woman surpassing all measures of beauty and grace, one who is worthy to be mother to this queen."

Amen-Ra said, "This is good news. Where does this woman live? By what name is she known? "

"She is Aahmes, wife to the king of Egypt," said Thoth. "The palace of mighty Pharaoh Thutmose is her home. Come! I will take you to her!"

Amen-Ra agreed that it should be so. Thoth, taking the form of an ibis, flew from the court of the gods to the palace of the king. Amen-Ra took the form of the pharaoh, the husband of Aahmes, and followed thither. Attending Amun-Ra and Thoth were all the court of the gods.

The gods came to the palace by night when all were asleep within. Silently, the gods entered the bedchamber of the queen. They looked

upon her and marveled that she was even more beautiful and graceful than Thoth had said.

The queen stirred in her sleep, roused by the perfume of the gods. She opened her eyes to see the god Amen-Ra standing before her, wearing the guise of her husband. Aahmes was immediately inflamed with desire for Amen-Ra. He took her to him, and his divinity flooded all her senses.

When Amen-Ra was finished making love to Aahmes, he said to her, "You shall be the mother of my daughter. She shall be named Hatshepsut. I wish that when she is fully come to womanhood, she shall reign over all Egypt."

Their mission finished, the gods returned to their court. Amen-Ra called to him Khnum, the potter-god. Amen-Ra said, "Mighty Khnum! Take your potter's wheel, and with your skill fashion for me a daughter. Make her even more beautiful than a goddess! And then when you have made her body, fashion for her a *ka*, a spirit, that she might live and breathe."

Khnum replied, "It shall be as you have commanded, O great Amen-Ra!"

Khnum set to work on his potter's wheel. First, he took clay and made a body for Amen-Ra's daughter, making it the fairest of all, fairer even than a goddess' might be. Then he made an identical clay figure to be the *ka* of Amen-Ra's daughter. While he bent to his work, Hekt, the goddess of childbirth, held the sign of life over the clay figures, so that when they were fully made and joined together, the body and *ka* might have life.

When he was done, Khnum showed Amen-Ra the body and *ka* he had made to be Hatshepsut, and Amen-Ra pronounced himself greatly satisfied with them.

The gods then returned to the palace, carrying with them the body and *ka* of Hatshepsut, placing them together within Queen Aahmes. When the time came for her baby to be born, she was attended by the whole court of the gods. All the gods and all the people rejoiced at the birth of Hatshepsut. And when she was a full-grown woman, she became the great Queen of Egypt, the Pharaoh of all the lands, as her father Amen-Ra desired.

The Tale of the Famine

This tale is preserved on a stele on Sehel Island. The date of the story is unclear; Djoser was a king of the Third Dynasty, but some scholars put the carving in the Ptolemaic period. In any event, one purpose of the story would seem to have been to legitimize possession of the lands and resources that the original stele names in some detail.

We also see the flexibility of Egyptian myth when it comes to naming a creator-god. As we have seen, some legends say that Atum created the world, while others give Ptah this honor. Here it is Khnum who claims to have arisen from Nun, the Void of the Waters.

In the eighteenth year of the reign of Pharaoh Djoser, a hard time came to the people of Egypt. Hapi, god of the Nile, had withheld his blessing for seven long years. The land dried up, and the grain would not grow. Children cried from hunger, and even the rich did not have enough to eat. The priests closed the temples, for both they and the people were too poor and too weak to make offerings and give the gods their rightful and proper worship.

Pharaoh Djoser looked out upon the land of Egypt, and his heart was pained. "Look at how my people suffer," he said. "There is no food. The crops will not grow. The god Hapi has deserted us, and I do not know what we have done to deserve this or how to regain his favor."

The pharaoh thought long upon what he should do, and finally he went to the priest of Imhotep and told him of the suffering of his people. He asked the priest why the floods had not come and why the people must suffer so.

The priest of Imhotep said, "I shall go to the Temple of Thoth in Hermopolis. There I shall consult the sacred scrolls, and they will tell me what to do."

Soon the priest returned and gave Pharaoh this answer: "I have read the sacred scrolls, and they have given me the things you need to know. Know first that there is a town called Yebu, surrounded by the waters of Hapi. There lays the island of Elephantine, where there are twin caverns that are the house of Hapi. Khnum is the god of that region. He is the one who governs over the grain, the fish, and the birds. His region is rich in many kinds of stones and gems and in many growing plants and flowers. Other gods are also revered there in the Temple of Khnum: Satis, Anukis, Hapi, Shu, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Horus, Isis, and Nepthys. All these are the things that you need to know."

Pharaoh Djoser went away and thought about what he had learned. Then he made a good and rich offering of bread and beer, of oxen and birds, and all manner of good things that are fit to make sacrifice to Khnum and all the other gods that the priest had named to him. When Djoser had done all this, he was tired and went to bed.

As Djoser slept, the god Khnum came to him in a dream, shining with radiance. Djoser prayed to Khnum and adored him.

Khnum said, "I am Khnum. I am the one who came forth from Nun, I am he who came forth uncreated. I am the one who created the gods, the people, and all things. It is I who keep you safe. I will give you

many riches, many stones and gems to build temples. I will go to Hapi and I will tell him to make the flood so that your fields will bear much grain. I will tell Hapi to flood so that your people will no longer hunger, and so that all will have joy.”

The king woke up from his dream. He remembered all that Khnum had said, and in thanks he made a royal decree giving lands to be the support of a temple for Khnum and for taxes in fish, game, grain, cattle, gold, timber, and many other good things to be paid yearly to the temple in honor of the god Khnum who released the flood of the Nile and ended the famine of the people.

Part III

Other Stories

The Shipwrecked Sailor

The following story is preserved in a single papyrus that is now in Moscow which dates from the Middle Kingdom. A colophon at the foot of the tale states that Imenaa, son of Imeny, was the scribe who copied it. One of the striking things about this story is the amount of descriptive detail it contains. This includes the measurements of the sailor's ship: 120 by 40 cubits. A cubit was an ancient standard of measurement taken to be the distance between the elbow and the tips of the fingers, so the ship was roughly 180 feet long by 60 feet wide, or about 55 meters long by 18 meters wide.

One important aspect of Egyptian life is emphasized in this tale, when the serpent insists that the sailor will die at home. Egyptians had a horror of dying away from their homeland, because their religion dictated that the soul of the deceased had to be properly buried and attended by the survivors if it were to have any hope of achieving a happy afterlife.

The ship of the minister of the pharaoh sailed into the harbor. The sailors all busied themselves about their work, taking in the sails, tossing out the ropes to those on the docks, and tying the boat fast to its moorings. All was hustle and bustle, all was in motion, and everyone was happy to finally be home—all except for the minister of the pharaoh. The minister sat in the prow of the boat, his chin upon his hands, looking despondent.

One of the sailors noticed the minister and saw that he was sad.

"O Excellency," said the sailor, "why are you sad? We've just come safe home, just sailed into port after a fair voyage. Everyone is happy; we'll soon get to go ashore and eat and drink and be with our families. Why are you not happy too? What is it that troubles you?"

The minister sighed. "It's all very well for you," he said. "The places you're going, people will want to see you. They'll be happy that you're home. They'll make a feast for you, brew beer, play music, and everyone will dance. And you'll get to embrace your children and your wife and have a good time with them until you have to go to sea again.

"Me, I have to go to Pharaoh. I have to tell him what befell in the far kingdom. I have to tell him that what he sent me for did not happen, that my mission did not succeed. There will be no banquet for me, no beer, no music, no warm welcome. I won't see my children or my wife. I must make my report to Pharaoh, but I am afraid of what will happen when I do."

“Oh,” said the sailor. “That is bad. I can see how that would make you sad. But you do have to go to Pharaoh. You do have to give your report. But maybe you can tell it in a way so Pharaoh won’t be angry with you.”

The minister gave the sailor a dubious look, then put his chin back on his fist.

“Cheer up,” said the sailor, sitting down next to the minister. “Sometimes when something looks terribly bad, it turns out to be the best thing that could have happened. Why, something like that happened to me once on a voyage I took. It seemed like it would be a disaster. It seemed like I would never go home to my wife and children again. But it actually turned out to be the most wonderful adventure. Let me tell you my tale.

“Once I boarded a ship bound for the king’s mines. It was a great ship, 120 cubits long and 40 cubits wide. But the best part about that ship was the crew. 120 sailors they were, all stout-hearted men, braver even than lions! They were all clever seamen, could see a storm coming from far off.

“We had sailed for a time when suddenly a wave eight cubits high came out of nowhere. It struck the ship, breaking it into pieces, I grabbed at the mast, held it fast, and tried to fight my way clear of the wreckage and keep my head above water. It was quite a struggle!

“Finally, when all was calm again, I saw that my ship had vanished beneath the waves and all its crew with her. I was the only survivor, out there on the waters, and no help in sight. I looked about me, wondering what troubles would befall me.

“Suddenly, a great wave picked me up. The wave pushed me, as I clung to the mast of the destroyed ship, all the way to an island. I had never seen this island before, didn’t even know it was there, but I was grateful to have found land. When I got my breath, I got up and wandered around. Such an island I had never seen before and never have seen since! The whole place was like a garden, with fig trees bursting with fruit and vines heavy with grapes. Cucumbers were on their vines, long and cool, looking like they had been tended by a master gardener. There were fish in the streams and wildfowl for the taking. First, I ate of what I found there, and when I was stuffed to bursting, I kindled a fire and made an offering to the gods.

“Just as I finished making the offering, I heard a roaring noise. I turned and looked behind me, thinking that it was another great wave from the sea. But that was not the source of the noise. I heard cracking and splintering, and before me I saw trees falling over, as though great lumbermen were felling them with single strokes. I was so frightened that I was frozen to the spot .

“But wait—that’s not the worst of it. That’s not the most frightening thing. The thing that was knocking over the trees? Now that was something to make the heart jump right out of your body. It was a giant serpent, 30 cubits long. His body gleamed with golden scales, his eyebrows made of lapis lazuli. A beard he had, too, two cubits long.

“This great serpent reared up in front of me. I fell down on my face before him.

“‘Who are you?’ demanded the serpent. His voice was like the blade of a sword being drawn from its sheath, like the sound of hot metal when a blacksmith plunges it into cold water. ‘Who are you, and why have you come to my island? Tell me now, or the fire of my breath will turn you into ashes and nothing more of you shall exist ever again!’

“I trembled on the ground in front of the serpent. I could not find my voice to answer his questions. I expected to die. I waited for him to blast fire from his mouth and turn me to ash. But to my surprise, the serpent picked me up in his mouth! He picked me up and carried me to the place that was his home.

“When I came to my senses, I found myself on the floor of the serpent’s home. The serpent was there, waiting for me to wake up. I fell on my face before him and trembled.

“‘Who are you?’ asked the serpent. ‘Why have you come to my island?’

“This time I was able to answer.

“‘O Great Serpent,’ I said, ‘I was in a ship with 120 companions, stout seamen all, and braver than lions! We were on our way to the mines of the king when we were struck by a great wave. The wave was so mighty, it burst the ship into pieces. All my companions were killed. Only I survived, clinging to the mast. A wave of the sea picked me up and pushed me onto the shore of your island.’

“The serpent heard my story, and he said to me, ‘Do not be afraid. I will not harm you. I see that you are a favored one, favored by god. This is an enchanted island. Only those who have the favor of god may come to these shores.’

“‘I know what will happen to you,’ said the serpent. ‘You will live on this island for four months. You will eat of the good things that grow here, of the fish and of the wildfowl. You will lack for nothing. And at the end of four months, a ship from your country will arrive to take you home. You will go home with them, and when you die, it will be in your hometown.’

“Then the serpent told me his own story.

“‘I understand your sorrow at losing all your companions. Something similar happened to me. Once, this island was full of serpents. I lived

here in peace with my brothers and sisters. There were many young serpents too, often playing in the gardens. One of them was my daughter.

“Then one day a ball of fire came flashing out of the heavens. The ball of fire hit the island, causing the ground to shake. Everything caught fire. The whole island burned, and all my family were swallowed up in the flames. I only escaped because I was not there. When I came home, I found everything burned. I found my family dead, and in my heart, I felt as though I had died too.’

“‘So be brave!’ said the serpent. ‘Have no fear! You will go back to your hometown. You will see your wife and your children again.’”

“It was such a sad story,” said the sailor to the minister. “I felt bad for the serpent, losing his whole family like that, especially when I was assured of going back home to mine. I wanted to bring him some comfort and let him know how grateful I was.

“I fell on my face before him. ‘O Great Serpent, when I get home, I shall go straight to Pharaoh! I shall tell him what a mighty Serpent you are, and he shall send you many good things in return: myrrh, oil, incense, spices of every kind. When I get home to my country, I will tell everyone what happened to me, tell everyone your story, and the priests will make sacrifice to you, of cattle and of fowl. And then we will pile boats high with every kind of good thing and bring them here to your island.’

“I thought the serpent would be pleased with this, but instead he laughed.

“‘Everything you have offered me I already have in abundance. I am a Prince of Punt. Myrrh and incense I have in plenty, more even than is in the whole kingdom of Egypt! And besides, once you have left this island, it will vanish. You will never be able to find it again, no matter how long you search.’

“I lived on the island with the serpent for four months, and I lacked for nothing. And at the end of the four months, I saw the sails of a ship on the horizon. A ship from my home was sailing by, just as the serpent had promised. I climbed up to the top of the tree, waving and calling to the sailors. Then I went to tell the serpent that the ship had arrived, as he had said.

“‘Go with your people,’ said the serpent. ‘The only thing I ask is that you tell your people this story, that you tell them of the Great Serpent of the Enchanted Island, and how it is with him.’

“I fell on my face before the serpent and vowed that I would do exactly as he said.

“Then the serpent prepared many gifts for me, a whole cargo of goods to take home. Myrrh and oils he gave me, spices of every kind in

abundance, incense and ivory, hounds and baboons in plenty. All these I loaded onto the ship.

“When it came time for me to leave, the serpent said, ‘It will take you two months to get home from here. Embrace your wife. Have many children. Live a life of peace. And you will die in your hometown.’

“While I had been talking with the serpent, the ship came ashore onto the island. I told the captain and the crew all that had happened and all that the serpent had done for me. When the sailors heard my story, they also fell down before the serpent and praised him .

“We set sail, and in two months we were home, just as the serpent had said. Straightaway I went to the palace of the pharaoh, bringing the cargo of gifts the serpent had given me. I gave the gifts to the king and told him my story. The king was so pleased that he made me one of his retainers and gave me servants of my own to serve me and my family.

“So,” said the sailor to the minister, “we can’t always see what will really happen after calamity strikes. Who knows? Maybe Pharaoh won’t be angry with you. Maybe something good will come of this, just like something good came of my shipwreck.”

The minister merely shook his head. “Thank you for your story, but it’s no use, my friend. No use trying to give water to a goose that is already cooked.”

The Two Brothers

This next story is found in a New Kingdom papyrus dating from the 19th Dynasty, copied by a scribe named Ennana. Many scholars have commented on the parallels between the beginning of the story and the tale of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife in the Old Testament ((Genesis 39). In the Bible story, Joseph is an Israelite who has been captured and made a slave by the Egyptians. He is sold to Potiphar, a captain of the guard, who eventually puts Joseph in charge of his household. Like Bata, Joseph was well-built and very good-looking; Potiphar’s wife asks Joseph to sleep with her, but Joseph refuses. Potiphar’s wife is both angry and ashamed, and so pretends to have been assaulted by Joseph, who is then thrown into prison. He eventually is released when he demonstrates an ability to accurately interpret dreams.

The character of Bata also has clear parallels with Osiris, the dying and rising god whose phallus was also consumed by a fish. At one point in the story, Bata is addressed as “Bull of the Nine Gods.” “Bull” was also one of the epithets of Osiris.

Once there were two brothers. The elder brother was named Anubis and the younger was named Bata. Anubis was well off. He had a house of his own, a fine wife, land, and cattle. Bata lived with him, and

Anubis looked after him as though he were a son. Bata worked hard for his brother. He made clothes for Anubis, tended the cattle, he plowed and tended the fields, and saw to the harvest when it was time. There was none like Bata in the whole of Egypt: he was a fine figure of a man with the strength of a god.

Every day, Bata would take the cattle out to pasture, and when he returned home, he would bring with him fruits that he had gathered, milk from the cattle, and wood for the fire. Bata brought these things to the house where Anubis lived with his wife, and he would place them at the feet of his brother. Then Bata would eat and drink, and afterwards went to the stable where he slept with the cattle.

In the mornings, Bata cooked breakfast for himself, his brother, and his brother's wife. Then he would make a meal for himself to take to the fields. He would drive the cattle to the fields; he was such a good herdsman that he could understand what the cattle said to him. They would tell him, "Let's go to that pasture there, the grass is better." And Bata would listen and take the cattle there, and the cattle would be grateful. The cattle ate well; they fattened and they had many young. Under Bata's care, the herds of Anubis increased greatly.

The time once again came for the plowing of the fields. Anubis said to Bata, "Make ready the oxen for plowing, and see to it that we have seed. The soil is ready for planting. Tomorrow we begin."

Bata went and did all that his brother asked of him.

The next morning, Bata and Anubis hitched the oxen to the plow. They plowed many good furrows in the fields, and they sowed much seed. At the end of the day, they looked upon their work and were glad, for they had done it well.

Bata and Anubis plowed for many days. They sowed much seed. But after a time, they found that they did not have enough seed for the land that they had plowed.

Anubis told Bata, "Go to the village and fetch us more seed."

Bata went back to the village, to the house of his brother. There he found his brother's wife, braiding her hair. Bata said to her, "Fetch me some more seed, for my brother and I have need of it."

She replied, "You may take it from the storeroom yourself. I must finish braiding my hair."

Bata went into the storeroom and picked up a great quantity of seed, placing it on his shoulder. Then he went out to return to the fields. His brother's wife saw him with the sacks on his shoulder and admired his strength.

"How many sacks are you carrying?" she said.

"I have three sacks of emmer and two of barley," said Bata.

"Oh," said his sister-in-law, "you must be very strong indeed."

She looked upon Bata, with the sacks on his shoulder, and she desired very greatly to lie with him. She went to him, putting her arms around him, and said, "Come and lie with me. I know you will like it. And I can make fine clothes for you if you wish."

This made Bata very angry. He pushed her away and said, "What is this you ask of me? You are like a mother to me, and my brother is like a father. Do not ask such things! But have no fear. I will tell no one of what happened here."

Bata returned to the field with the seed. He helped Anubis finish the plowing and the sowing. Bata said nothing of what had transpired between himself and the wife of Anubis. At the end of the day, Bata collected food, milk, and wood, as was his custom, and drove the cattle back to their stable while Anubis returned to his house.

Now, while the men were still out at their work, the wife of Anubis became very frightened because of what she had said to Bata. She took some grease, tore her clothes, and made it look like she had been assaulted. When her husband returned from his work in the fields, he found that all was dark and still. He went looking for his wife, and he found her lying on the floor, seemingly ill.

"What has happened to you?" asked Anubis.

"When your brother came home to fetch seed, he found me here alone," said the wife of Anubis. "Your brother said to me, 'Let us lie together.' I told him I would not do this thing. 'Am I not like a mother to you?' I said. 'Is my husband and your brother not like a father to you?' Then he beat me, to make me afraid to tell you what had happened. You must take your revenge for this! You must kill him! For this is why I am ill and afraid, from what your younger brother did to me."

Anubis heard the words of his wife, and he became enraged. He took his spear and sharpened it, and then he hid in the stable to lie in wait for Bata. Soon enough, Bata returned with the cattle. He opened the door to the stable, and the lead cow said to him, "Beware! Your brother lies in wait for you. He has a spear, and he means to kill you! Run away!"

Bata was surprised by what the lead cow said. He did not believe her. But then the next cow went in and said the same. Bata crouched down and looked under the stable door. There he saw the feet of his brother, who was lying in wait for him. Bata put down the load he was carrying and ran away. Anubis heard him run and darted out of the stable, chasing his brother as he brandished his spear.

Bata ran as hard as he could, and while he ran, he prayed to Ra-Horakhty. "O Mighty Ra! You are the judge of the wicked and the good!"

Ra-Horakhty heard the prayer of the younger brother. He made a river spring up between Bata and Anubis and filled the river with crocodiles. Bata was on one side of the river and Anubis on the other. Anubis stamped and shouted with impatience because he could not get to his brother to kill him.

“Stay there,” called Bata across the water. “Stay there until the sun rises, and you and I shall present our cases to the great god Aten that he may judge between us! But, however he shall judge, I shall live with you no longer. I shall go and live in the Valley of the Acacia.”

Night came, and then dawn arrived. And when the sun had risen, the two brothers looked at each other across the water that had sprung up at the command of Ra. Bata called out to his brother, “Why are you chasing me with that spear? Why do you want to kill me without first hearing from me what happened? You are like a father to me, and your wife is like a mother. When I went back to the house to fetch seed, your wife came to me and said, ‘Lie with me.’ I did no wrong, and yet you wish to kill me!”

Then Bata swore by the great Ra-Horakhty that he was telling the truth. After he had told his tale, Bata took a knife and cut off his male member. He threw it into the river that had appeared at the command of Ra where a fish swallowed it. This weakened Bata greatly .

Seeing this and hearing Bata’s story made Anubis very sorrowful. He began to weep. But he could not help his brother because the river full of crocodiles still stood between them. Bata said to his brother, “Go home. Tend your cattle yourself. I shall not return there ever again. I shall go to the Valley of the Acacia, and you shall come and look for me one day. I shall cut my heart out, and I shall place it at the top of the acacia. When the acacia is felled and it falls to the ground, you will know that something has befallen. And you will know this when someone hands you a jug of beer and it ferments in your hand.

“Come search for my heart when that happens. And even if it takes seven years, do not give up the search. When you find my heart, put it in a bowl of cool water and I shall live again and take revenge on those who have wronged me. When the beer ferments, do not delay! Come looking for me on the instant!”

Then Bata went to the Valley of the Acacia, while Anubis returned to his home. Anubis took dust in his hands, and he threw it on his head and body. Then he went into his house and killed his wife. He cut up her body and fed it to the dogs. When that was done, he mourned for his younger brother.

In the Valley of the Acacia, Bata spent his days hunting, and at night he would sleep under the acacia tree where he had placed his heart. After a time, he built himself a fine house and filled it with many good

things.

One day, Bata walked out of his house and saw the Nine Gods walking by as they did their work. The Nine Gods saw Bata and they said to him, "O Bata, Bull of the Nine Gods, why are you here alone? Know you that Anubis, your elder brother, has killed his faithless wife? The wrong to you has been avenged!"

The gods saw that Bata lived alone which made them sorrowful, so Ra-Horakhty said to Khnum, "Fashion a wife for Bata. It is not good that he is alone."

Khnum did as Ra commanded. He fashioned a wife for Bata, making her more beautiful than any woman who had ever lived. When he was done, the Seven Hathors looked upon her and said, "She shall be killed with a blade."

Bata took his new wife into his home gladly. She was very beautiful, and he loved her. She spent her days at home in the house Bata had built while he went hunting in the desert. Bata was a skilled hunter, and every day he would bring home fresh game to lay at his wife's feet. Bata told his wife, "You must never leave the house. The sea is there, and it might try to take you. If it does, I will not be able to help you since I am a woman like you. Also, my heart is kept at the top of the acacia tree. If anyone else finds it, I shall have to fight him." And Bata told her all the other things that were in his mind.

For a long time, the young woman did as Bata had commanded, and she stayed within the house. But one day, she tired of being indoors and wished to sit in the shade of the acacia tree that held Bata's heart. When Bata left to go hunting, the young woman went outside and walked towards the tree. Just as Bata had said, the sea noticed that she was walking outdoors and sent up a great wave to snatch her. The young woman ran as fast as she could back into the house, but the sea still tried to follow her.

Realizing it wouldn't reach her in time, the sea called to the acacia tree for help, saying "I wish to have the wife of Bata! Catch her!"

The acacia tree reached out and grabbed at the woman, but all it was able to catch was a lock of her hair. The lock of hair fell into the sea where it floated away towards Egypt. For many days it floated until finally it came to rest in the place where the washermen of Pharaoh were doing their work. The perfume that was in the lock of hair wound through the water and soaked into Pharaoh's clothing.

When the washermen brought Pharaoh his fresh clothing, Pharaoh sniffed at them and angrily exclaimed, "There is a scent on this! How did ointment get on my clothing?"

The chief washerman said, "We put no scent on Pharaoh's clothing. We do not know why it smells that way."

Pharaoh shouted, "Wash it again! And do not bring it back to me until the scent is gone."

This went on for many days. The washermen were upset that Pharaoh was displeased, and Pharaoh was angry that his clothing had the strange perfume on it. The chief of the royal washermen went down to the river with a basket of clothes, muttering to himself about the now-daily argument with Pharaoh when he saw something on the bank of the opposite river.

The chief washerman called a servant to him and said, "Do you see that thing on the opposite bank of the river? Go, find out what it is, and bring it to me."

The servant did as he was bid, and lo! The thing on the bank of the river was the lock of hair that the acacia tree had snatched from the head of Bata's wife. The chief washerman held it under his nose and sniffed it, finding the smell to be very sweet. Then he sniffed at Pharaoh's clothing. It had the same scent. The washerman took the lock of hair back to Pharaoh's palace and showed it to Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh called together all the wisest men in the city and asked them what the scent was.

The scribes examined the lock of hair and the scent that was on it. They said to Pharaoh, "This lock of hair belongs to a daughter of Ra-Horakhty. It is a message to you from a far-off land."

Pharaoh asked, "What is it that I should do?"

The scribes told Pharaoh, "Send out messengers. Find out who the lock of hair belongs to. Send one envoy to the Valley of the Acacia with many men to help him. If the daughter of Ra is there, the men can fetch her back to you. "

All this seemed wise counsel to Pharaoh, so he ordered it done as the scribes had said. Many messengers were sent out, far and wide. After a time, they began to come back. All that came back told Pharaoh, "We have not found the woman to whom that lock of hair belongs."

But one group of messengers never came back. These were the ones who Pharaoh had sent to the Valley of the Acacia. They did not come back because when they approached the valley, Bata killed them all, all except one whom he sent back to report to Pharaoh.

Pharaoh tried a second time. He sent a great many soldiers and charioteers. He also sent a woman with them who was given a case full of precious jewels with which to entice Bata's wife. Pharaoh's ploy worked. Bata's wife saw the jewels and gladly went to Egypt with the woman and the soldiers. When she arrived, everyone rejoiced for she was very beautiful. Pharaoh loved the young woman greatly and had her proclaimed Exalted Lady.

Pharaoh asked the young woman about Bata, and soon she had told

him everything, including how Bata's heart was housed in the acacia tree. Pharaoh spoke to his soldiers, "Go to the house of Bata. You will find there an acacia tree. Cut down the tree, and then chop it all to pieces."

The soldiers did as Pharaoh ordered. They cut down the tree, and they chopped it up until there were only pieces left. When this happened, Bata fell down dead.

The day after the tree was felled, Bata's brother, Anubis, went into his house after his work was done. He washed his hands, and a servant brought him a jug of beer. Anubis took the jug in his hands, but when he went to taste the beer, he found it had fermented. Anubis called for a glass of wine instead, but this too went sour in his hands. Then Anubis remembered all that Bata had told him. He knew that his brother was dead, and he knew what he must do.

Immediately Anubis set out for the Valley of the Acacia. Soon he arrived there and went into his brother's house. There he found Bata, lying on his bed. Anubis wept to see that his brother was dead, but then he remembered that he must search for his brother's heart. He went out and searched all about the place where the acacia had stood, but to no avail. Anubis searched for three whole years, but no matter how hard he tried, he could not find Bata's heart.

At the beginning of the fourth year, Anubis began to feel that he wanted to go back to Egypt. He thought long about what he should do because he had promised Bata that he would look until he found his brother's heart. But finally, Anubis said to himself, "No, I shall go home. It is time for me to return to Egypt. I shall go tomorrow."

Before departing, Anubis thought, "I shall make one more effort to find Bata's heart. I shall look one more time before I leave."

Anubis went to the place where the acacia had stood. He looked and looked, and his eye landed upon a strange-looking fruit. He picked it up and realized that it was Bata's heart!

Anubis ran back into the house. As Bata had asked of him, he put the heart into a bowl full of cool water. Throughout the night, the heart soaked up all the water. Suddenly the body of Bata shivered, from head to toe, and he sat up. Anubis took the bowl of water that held Bata's heart, and he gave Bata the bowl so he could drink from it. As soon as Bata had taken a sip of the water, his heart returned to its rightful place, and Bata was alive again. The brothers both rejoiced to see one another once more.

When they had finished telling one another the tales of what had passed for each of them while they were parted, Bata said to Anubis, "I am going to turn myself into a Bull. It will be a kind of Bull that no one has ever seen before. When I am transformed, mount upon my

back, and we shall go and search out those who have wronged me, that I might have my revenge. Take me before Pharaoh and say, 'Look, O Mighty Pharaoh, here is a marvellous Bull which I give to you.' And Pharaoh will be well pleased, and he will reward you with much gold and silver."

Then Bata transformed himself into a Bull, the likes of which had never been seen before. Anubis mounted upon its back, and together they set out for Egypt and for the court of Pharaoh.

The next morning, they arrived at the palace. Everyone who saw them marvelled at the great Bull that Anubis was riding. A servant was dispatched to tell Pharaoh about the Bull. When Pharaoh came out to the courtyard, Anubis said to him, "Look, O Mighty Pharaoh, here is a marvellous Bull which I give to you."

And as Bata had said, Anubis was well rewarded. Pharaoh gave him gold and silver in plenty, along with servants and a fine house to dwell in in the town. Anubis quickly became one of the beloved favorites of Pharaoh.

Now, Bata lived at the court of Pharaoh in his Bull's form and had freedom to walk about wherever he wished. One day, he went into the kitchen, and there he saw his wife who was now Exalted Lady of Pharaoh's kingdom.

"My Lady," said Bata, "Do you not know me?"

The Lady wondered how a Bull could speak. "Should I know you?" she said.

"I am Bata, your husband, and see? I am alive. I have transformed myself into a great Bull."

When the Lady heard these words, she became very frightened and ran away from him.

That night, there was a great feast at the palace. The Lady reclined with Pharaoh and said to him, "O Great Pharaoh, swear to me by Ra himself that you will listen to whatever I say and swear that you will do whatever I desire."

Pharaoh told her that he would listen and that he would do.

The Lady said, "This great Bull you have, he really is a worthless creature. He walks about wherever he pleases and does nothing useful at all. Kill him and let me eat of his liver."

Then Pharaoh was sorry he had promised the Lady that he would do what she said for the Bull was very marvellous. But Pharaoh had promised by Ra himself, so he could not go back on his oath.

The next morning, Pharaoh called to himself his priests and the royal slaughterer. He ordered them to make a sacrifice of the marvellous Bull. The slaughterer and his helpers did as Pharaoh commanded and killed the Bull, cutting it up. As they were taking the pieces away, the

Bull shook his neck, and two drops of blood fell along the lintels of the door of Pharaoh. Where the drops fell there sprouted two Persea trees. The trees grew all night, and in the morning a servant went to Pharaoh saying, "O Mighty Pharaoh, come and see! At the lintels of the great door there are now two great Persea trees, beautiful to behold!"

Word about the trees spread throughout Egypt, and all the people rejoiced at the miracle. Pharaoh saw the trees and was amazed. He ordered offerings be prepared, and he himself made the offerings to the trees.

Many days passed. Then one day, Pharaoh adorned himself with a wreath of flowers. He mounted a golden chariot, and his Exalted Lady rode in another. The chariots went out from the palace and made their way to the place where the Persea trees were for Pharaoh had a desire to sit in their shade. When they arrived at the trees, Pharaoh took a seat under one tree and the Exalted Lady under the other.

The tree under which the Lady sat noticed her for the trees were none other than Bata himself. Bata whispered to her, "Ha! I know you. You are my treacherous wife. I am Bata, and I am still alive! I know it was because of you that the acacia tree was felled and cut up. And I know it was you who ordered me sacrificed when I was in the body of a Bull."

Some days later, the Lady sat with Pharaoh. They were drinking wine and were happy together. The Lady said to him, "Swear by the great god Ra that you will listen to what I say and do as I ask."

Pharaoh swore that he would do this. The Lady told him, "Take the two Persea trees and have them felled, for I wish the wood to be used for fine furniture."

Pharaoh did as the Lady asked. He sent men to chop down the tree and woodworkers to take the wood and fashion it into beautiful things as the Lady demanded. While they were felling the tree, the Exalted Lady stood watching their work. As the axes bit into the trunk, small splinters of wood flew into the air. One splinter landed in the mouth of the Lady, and she swallowed it. Not long afterwards, she found that she was with child.

When the time came, the Lady was delivered of a fine son. Pharaoh and all the people rejoiced, and the babe was well tended by a nurse and many maids. Pharaoh held his son and loved him very much. He made a proclamation that the babe was to be named Viceroy of Kush, and a little while after that, Pharaoh made him Crown Prince.

Now, many years later, when the Crown Prince had come to manhood, the old Pharaoh died. The Prince was crowned king. However, this was no ordinary Prince. No, this was Bata himself, come

back to life again from the splinter that the Exalted Lady had swallowed .

Pharaoh Bata called before him his wife. He judged her in the presence of the court, and they agreed with his judgement. Pharaoh Bata called for his brother Anubis to be brought before him. He made Anubis Crown Prince of the land. For thirty years, Bata reigned as Pharaoh in Egypt. And when he died, Anubis stood in his place.

The Princess and the Demon

The primary deity in this myth is Khonsu, god of the moon. Khonsu was especially revered at Thebes (modern-day Luxor), and part of the surviving temple complex at Karnak is devoted to him. Khonsu was considered to be a protector-god and a healer by the ancient Egyptians. In ancient Thebes there originally were at least three different temples devoted to separate aspects of the god: this comes into play in this story when an aspect of Khonsu from one temple grants power to his counterpart at another.

The myth of the princess and the demon is set during the reign of Rameses II (1279-1213 BC) , but the late Egyptologist E. A. Wallis Budge states that it seems to have been carved much later, probably between 650 and 250 bc . Budge assumed that the purpose of the myth was to elevate the status of Khonsu by stressing his power to cast out evil spirits.

Once, long ago in the reign of Pharaoh Ramses II, there was a prince of the realm named Bekhten. Bekhten had been blessed with a daughter who was so beautiful, she was said to be just like Amen-Ra as he shines at midday.

Now, every year all of the princes of the realm came to meet with Pharaoh at a place along the Euphrates River, to do Pharaoh honor and to pay him their tribute. They brought precious stones, gold, silver, fragrant wood, incense, myrrh, and many other beautiful and valuable things as tribute. One year, when Bekhten's daughter was of an age to be married, he brought her with him to the giving of the tribute. The nobles came forth one by one to give their tribute, but Rameses had eyes for none of the wealth that they brought to him. He had already espied the daughter of Bekhten and was so entranced by her beauty that he could think of nothing else.

Rameses went to Bekhten and said, "My Lord Prince, I have beheld the beauty of your daughter, for lo, she is like to Amen-Ra at the noontide. I can think of nothing else but her. I ask of you her hand in marriage."

Bekhten considered Rameses' request and, with his daughter's consent, gave her in marriage to Pharaoh. Because of her great loveliness, Rameses bestowed a new name upon her, calling her "Neferu-Ra," which means "Beauty of Ra." When the time of giving tribute was done, Rameses and Neferu-Ra returned to Egypt. There Rameses made

Neferu-Ra his queen.

One summer, Rameses went to the temple of Amen-Ra at Luxor to celebrate the festival of the god there. While he was at the festival, a messenger arrived from Queen Neferu-Ra's father, Prince Bekhten. A servant was dispatched to the temple to tell Pharaoh that the messenger wished to speak to him .

Rameses completed his duties at the temple and returned to his palace. He greeted the messenger, who had arrived with many rich gifts from Prince Bekhten to be given to Pharaoh and to his queen.

"Well met, O Messenger from the father of my wife," said Pharaoh. "What have you to say to us?"

The messenger bowed down low in front of Pharaoh and said, "O Mighty Pharaoh, forgive me for arriving with ill news. I come from my master, Prince Bekhten, who is father of your queen, begging you for your help. Queen Neferu-Ra's sister, the Princess Bent-enth-resh, has been stricken with a malady that none can cure. All the doctors and magicians in our land have tried their best, and yet none have been able to heal her. My master, Prince Bekhten, has sent me to ask of Your Majesty for a doctor or magician, one who is wise and skilled, to come and heal his daughter, the sister of your queen."

"Ill news, indeed!" said Rameses. "It shall be done as you ask. Give me but time to find the wisest and most skilled of my healers, and they shall return with you. Go now and take rest after your journey. I shall send for you when all is prepared."

The messenger again bowed low before Pharaoh with many thanks and was taken to a fair chamber where he could refresh himself while he waited for Pharaoh's summons.

Rameses called to himself all the learned men in his realm. He also commanded all the magicians from the great College of Magic at Thebes to attend him, that they might choose the best among them to go to his sister-in-law's aid. The wise men consulted among themselves and chose a magician named Tehuti-em-heb to return with the messenger of Bekhten.

When Tehuti-em-heb was brought to see Bent-enth-resh, he spoke with her and examined her. Soon it became clear to him that this was no ordinary malady; the princess had been possessed by an evil spirit. Summoning all his wisdom, Tehuti-em-heb tried to cast the demon out from the princess. Tehuti-em-heb tried one spell after another, the strongest ones he knew, but to no avail. The demon merely laughed at him and refused to leave the princess' body.

Prince Bekhten called the magician to him. "Magician," he said, "I know that you have done all in your power to heal my daughter, but this seems to be beyond your skill. Return to Egypt and see what other

help mighty Pharaoh might have to send to me.”

Tehuti-em-heb bowed low to Prince Bekhten, saying, “It shall be done as you ask, O Prince. I am only sorry that my help was to no avail.”

The magician returned to Egypt with a messenger from the prince. When they arrived, they found Pharaoh in Thebes, where a festival was taking place.

Immediately the messenger told Pharaoh what had happened with the princess and that yet more aid was required if she were to be healed. Upon hearing this news, Pharaoh went immediately to the temple of the god Khonsu Nefer-hetep. There he bowed before the statue of the god and said, “O Mighty Khonsu! The sister of my lady wife lies ill. She is possessed by a demon. We beg of thee thine aid in this matter that she might be cured! ”

Then the priests of Khonsu Nefer-hetep took up the statue of their god, taking it to the place where the statue of Khonsu Pa-ari-sekher was, for that Khonsu had special power against demons and evil spirits. The priests faced the statue of Khonsu Nefer-hetep in front of that of Khonsu Pa-ari-sekher.

Then Pharaoh said to Khonsu Nefer-hetep, “O Mighty One! We ask thy permission to send Khonsu Pa-ari-sekher to the land of Prince Bekhten, where the sister of my lady wife lies ill, possessed by a demon. Allow him to go, that she might be well again!”

Khonsu Nefer-hetep heard the plea of Pharaoh. The statue bowed its head twice.

Once again Pharaoh addressed the god. “O Mighty Khonsu Nefer-hetep!” he said. “Give to the statue of Khonsu Pa-ari-sekher thy *sa* , your great magical power, that he might heal the sister of my lady wife!”

Again Khonsu Nefer-hetep heard the cries of Pharaoh, and he gave his *sa* to the other statue.

The priests of Khonsu put the statue in a boat. Accompanied by many other boats, and by chariots and horses, the statue of Khonsu Pa-ari-sekher sailed the long journey to the land of Prince Bekhten. When they arrived, they were given good welcome by the prince. He took them to the place where the princess was.

“O Mighty Khonsu,” said the prince, “here is my daughter. She is possessed of an evil spirit. We ask thy help to cast it out from her, so that she might be well again!”

From inside the princess’ body came a strange growling voice. “Here I am, the one who is inside the princess. I see thee there, Mighty Khonsu! I see thee there, looking at me. I sense thy great *sa* , the strength of thy magical powers. They are greater powers even than mine. I hear thy command to depart, and I will obey, if first the Prince

of Bekhten makes a festival in my honor.”

The god Khonsu bowed his head twice. “I hear thee, O Demon! I hear thy request, and I grant it. I command the Prince of Bekhten to hold a festival in thine honor!”

All trembled at the sound of the speech of the demon and the god, but the prince agreed that it should be done as the demon asked and the god commanded. A great festival was held in the city in the demon’s honor, and when it was done, the demon departed as he had promised.

Then the prince and his court went to visit the princess, along with the priests of Khonsu and the statue of the god. The princess was in her chamber and seemed to be asleep. All watched her anxiously. After a little time, she opened her eyes. She saw her father, his whole court, the priests of Khonsu, and the statue of the god all watching her.

“What is it?” she said. “Have I been asleep? Why are you all looking at me so strangely? Why has the mighty Khonsu come to visit me, here in my chamber?”

At that, the prince and his court and everyone else rejoiced, for they knew that truly the demon had departed and the princess was well again. The prince commanded that a great festival should be held, to celebrate the healing of his daughter. The priests and the people made many good sacrifices to the great Khonsu, and they ate and drank at a feast that lasted for three days.

When the festival was done, the priests of Khonsu made to depart for their home with the statue. But the prince would not let them go.

“No!” he said. “You may not depart. You must stay here in my land. What if the demon comes back? What if he takes my daughter again? I beg of you, remain here with your god. You can serve him well here, just as you did in Egypt, and I and my people will do him all the honor of Egypt and more for he saved the Princess Bent-enth-resh.”

The priests did as the prince asked. Setting up a shrine for the god in that land, they stayed there, and Khonsu had much honor from Prince Bekhten and his people.

Three years passed, and then nine months more with Khonsu and his priests still remaining in the land of Bekhten. One night at the end of this time, the prince betook himself to his rest. Laying down upon his royal bed, he slept. And in his sleep, he had a dream where he saw the shrine of Khonsu. The doors of the shrine opened and a great light came streaming out. Out of the shrine flew the god, in the shape of a golden hawk. The prince watched the hawk circle in the sky, once, twice, thrice, and then fly off in the direction of Egypt. Then the prince awoke.

In the morning, the prince called to him his counsellors. "Last night," he said, "I had a dream. I dreamt of the shrine of Khonsu. The shrine opened and from it streamed a great light. Out of the light flew a golden hawk. The hawk flew up in the air. It circled once, twice, thrice, and then flew off towards the land of Egypt. Tell me what this means, that I may know what is wise to do."

"O Mighty Prince," said the counsellors, "truly this means that the statue of Khonsu must be returned to Egypt forthwith, for the spirit of the god is no longer within it. Return therefore the statue to its rightful home in Egypt, so that the statue may be reunited with its spirit."

Bekhten sorrowed to hear this counsel, but he saw the wisdom of it. He called to him the priests of Khonsu Par-ari-sekher and gave them great thanks for all their service. He gave them many valuable gifts and sent them home to Egypt, where their god had gone before them.

The priests travelled back to their home, and when they arrived they gave all the gifts they had received to the god Khonsu Nefer-hetep. Khonsu Par-ari-sekher returned to his temple in peace, where his priests served him well to the end of their days.

The Taking of Joppa

This story purports to be the account of the retaking of Joppa (modern-day Jaffa, now part of Tel Aviv in Israel) from rebels who opposed Pharaoh Thutmose III (1481-1425 BC) by the clever Egyptian general Djehuty. It has elements in common with both the fairy tale "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" and with the story of the Trojan Horse. The beginning of the original story is lost; the version here is based on that by Lewis Spence in Myths and Legends: Ancient Egypt.

Pharaoh Thutmose had extended his kingdom far and wide, and he was well pleased with it all, except for the town of Joppa in Palestine, for the prince of Joppa had rebelled against Pharaoh and had retaken the town for himself. Pharaoh called together his wise men and military leaders to see what might be done to restore Joppa to Egypt, but none of them had any ideas. There was a silence in the council chamber for a moment, until a very young officer named Djehuty spoke up.

"O Mighty Pharaoh, may you live forever," said Djehuty. "I think I know how Joppa might be retaken."

"Speak," said Pharaoh, "and say what is in your mind."

"Give to me your magic staff that renders the holder invisible, along with a company of soldiers and charioteers, and I shall go to Joppa. I shall kill the rebel prince, and I shall retake the town of Joppa for Egypt."

At first Pharaoh was reluctant, because the magic staff was very precious, but he also knew that Djehuty was a clever, capable officer, respected by the soldiers and their commanders alike.

“Very well,” said Pharaoh. “You shall have all you ask. Go to Joppa, retake it for Egypt, and may the blessings of the gods go with you.”

Djehuty went to Palestine with the company of soldiers and charioteers. One of the soldiers came to him and asked, “O my Captain, when do we attack?”

“We do not attack,” said Djehuty. “I wish you to go into the city and find a leatherworker. Tell him to make me a leathern bag big enough to hold a man. Then go find a blacksmith. Tell him to make many chains to hold the wrists and ankles of prisoners, with one set made especially strong. Also have two hundred baskets made, well woven and big and strong enough to hold a man. When those things are made, have them delivered here.”

The soldier was very puzzled by this order, but he did not argue. He and two fellows went into the town and ordered the things to be made as Djehuty had commanded them. When all was in readiness, Djehuty called to him a scribe and had him write this message to the prince of Joppa:

To the Prince of Joppa, from Djehuty, Captain of the Egyptian army, greetings. I write to you as one brother to another, for Pharaoh is jealous of you and wishes you killed, and he feels the same towards me. But I have been too clever for Pharaoh: I have come here to Joppa to join forces with you, and together we will be unstoppable against him. I also bring with me a company of soldiers and charioteers, all good men and loyal to me. What is more, I have stolen Pharaoh's magic cane, the one that turns the holder invisible. If you let me join you, the cane is yours. Send to me straight away your answer in this matter.

The prince of Joppa read Djehuty's message and was very glad. He had heard much about Djehuty's cleverness and that he was well respected by the soldiers and commanders alike. The prince thought that with an ally like Djehuty there would be no way Pharaoh could resist him. He called for his chariot and for an escort of picked men, and he rode out of Joppa to meet Captain Djehuty.

From a long way off, Djehuty saw the prince and his escort approaching. He ordered food and wine brought to his tent, and when the prince arrived, Djehuty greeted him warmly and treated him as a welcomed guest. He took the prince into his tent, where they both ate and drank much wine, and soon they were both quite drunk.

“So,” said the prince, “you say you have the magic cane of Pharaoh.

That is a prize indeed! Bring it out that I might see it.”

Djehuty went out to where the baggage was kept. He searched it and found the cane, bringing it back to his tent where the prince was waiting.

“See this fine cane, with its heavy carved head?” said Djehuty. “This is the cane of Pharaoh.”

Then he took the cane and struck the prince on the head with it, killing him instantly. Djehuty called to his soldiers to put the heavy shackles on the wrists and ankles of the prince and to sew him inside the leathern bag that was big enough to hold a man. Then he told two hundred of his soldiers to each take a set of shackles and a length of rope and climb into the baskets. The baskets were covered and were carried by the other soldiers. There were five hundred men in all.

Djehuty told the sergeant, “Go to the city with these baskets. March up to the gates and tell them that the prince of Joppa sends greetings to his mistress, the princess. Tell her that Captain Djehuty and his men have been conquered by the grace of the gods, and that he is sending these two hundred baskets as tribute after his defeat. When they open the gates to you, go in and make prisoners of everyone inside the city.”

The sergeant did as he was told. He marched up to the gates of the city with his soldiers carrying the two hundred baskets with their fellows hidden inside. When he got to the gates, he sent his message to the princess, and she caused the gates to be opened. The soldiers of Djehuty marched into the town, carrying the baskets, and when the gates were well closed behind them, the men jumped out and took prisoner of every inhabitant of Joppa.

When all that had been done, Djehuty called for a scribe and had this message written to Pharaoh:

From Djehuty, Captain of Egypt, to Pharaoh, King of All Egypt, may he live forever, greetings. I write to tell you that as I promised the prince of Joppa has been killed and all the inhabitants of the town taken prisoner. They are your slaves to do with as you wish. Praise be to Amen-Ra, the mighty father of Pharaoh, for granting Egypt this victory.

And that is how the clever Captain Djehuty retook Joppa for Egypt .

Two Tales of Setne Khamwas

Like Queen Hatsephsut, Setne Khamwas was an actual historical figure. Egyptologist Miriam Lichtheim notes that Khamwas was the fourth son of Pharaoh Ramses II and was known during his lifetime as a learned man and high priest at the temple of Ptah in Memphis. After his death, many folktales were made featuring him as the main character. “Setne” is not

actually a name but rather is a corruption of the Egyptian word setem, for Khamwas was known as the setem-priest of Ptah, but in the tales, "Setne" comes to be used as a kind of forename.

Setne Khamwas and the Book of Thoth

The Search for the Book of Thoth

Once there was an Egyptian prince, a son of the pharaoh, and his name was Setne Khamwas. Khamwas was a very learned man. He spent all his time studying ancient scrolls and reading sacred inscriptions. He wanted always to increase his knowledge. Khamwas was also a magician, so many of his studies were devoted to increasing his skills in that art.

One day, it came to Khamwas' ears that there was a book of magic, a special and powerful book, that had been written by none other than the great god Thoth himself. When Khamwas heard of this, he lost no time preparing to search for it. He went to his foster brother, Inaros, and said, "Come with me! Together we will find this book of magic."

Together Khamwas and Inaros wandered up and down the whole country, going to temples, questioning the priests and scribes, and reading everything they could find that might have clues about where this marvellous book might be hidden. Finally, their labors were rewarded: they found out that the book was kept in the tomb of Na-nefer-kaptah, who in life had been a prince.

They learned that the tomb was in Memphis, and so they went there with all haste. Soon they arrived at the tomb. Khamwas went inside, while Inaros stood watch outside the door. Khamwas didn't have to look far to find the book, for there it was, in plain sight, even glowing with a light of its own.

Khamwas rejoiced at having found such a powerful book. He went over to it, taking it in his hands. As he did so, he heard a voice say, "Why take you this book? This is the Book of Thoth and the book of Na-nefer-kaptah. This book is forbidden to all others!"

Khamwas looked up, and there before him stood three spirits: those of Na-nefer-kaptah, a woman, and a child. "Why take you this book?" said the spirit of the woman.

"I am a magician," said Khamwas. "I heard of this book and wish to learn of its secrets."

"Take not the book!" said the spirit of the woman. "My husband, Na-nefer-kaptah, in life was a learned man and a magician, like you. He wanted to learn all the secrets of the gods. He found the book, read it, and did the magic that was in it. I also attempted those spells, for I wished also to learn the secrets of the gods. But the only thing that came of it was disaster, to him, to me, and to our son, Merab. If you have ears to listen, hear my tale and learn why this book is cursed,

and why you must not take it. Will you listen?" she asked.

"I will listen," replied Khamwas.

The Tale of Ahwere

Na-nefer-kaptah was the son of Pharaoh Merneptah, and I, Ahwere, was his sister. We were the only children of Pharaoh. When we were of an age to marry, we fell in love. We asked our father for permission to become man and wife. But Pharaoh refused, saying, "I will not allow you to marry. I wish my son to wed the daughter of a general, and I wish my daughter to wed the son of a general. And that is how it shall be. I, Pharaoh, have spoken."

I went to the steward of the palace, for he was my friend and he loved me well. I asked him to intervene on our behalf with Pharaoh. This he did with a good will, but he soon returned, saying that all had not gone well.

"I went to Pharaoh," said the steward, "and I pleaded your case before him. Pharaoh fell silent. He was unhappy. I asked him, 'Why is Pharaoh silent? Why is Pharaoh unhappy?' and he replied to me, 'I wish my son to wed a daughter of a general. I wish my daughter to wed the son of a general. Na-nefer-kaptah and Ahwere are my only children. It is not right that they should marry each other. I wish them to marry others, that our family may grow and thrive!'"

That night, there was a banquet at the palace. Pharaoh, my father, sent for me, that I might join him and his guests at the feast. I went as I was bidden, but I was downcast. My sadness had robbed me of all my beauty. Pharaoh saw me, noticing that I was unhappy. He said to me, "Ahwere, my daughter, was it you who told the steward to plead with me that you might marry your brother? Is this what is making you so unhappy and robbing you of your beauty?"

I answered Pharaoh, "Let my brother wed the daughter of a general and let me marry the son of a general. My brother and I are your only children. We should marry others, that our family may grow and thrive!"

Pharaoh heard me say his words. He smiled at me, and this made me smile. Then I laughed, which made Pharaoh laugh.

"Steward!" called the Pharaoh. "Ahwere is to go to the house of Na-nefer-kaptah this very night. Assist her and see that she has all she needs. See that her new home is made to her satisfaction and that it is as beautiful as she wishes."

Na-nefer-kaptah and I rejoiced that we were to be man and wife. Pharaoh made us many great gifts and gave us much gold and silver. Our friends and all the court rejoiced with us and also gave us many good gifts. We celebrated joyously with all our friends and family. We drank beer and wine, we ate all the choicest foods. The musicians

played, and we danced and sang until well into the night.

When it was time for everyone to go to their homes, Na-nefer-kaptah took me to his bed, where we delighted in one another. We lived in great happiness together for many days, and soon I found that I was with child. We took the news to Pharaoh who was overjoyed and sent us many fine gifts. After my nine months had passed, I was delivered of a fine son, named Merab, and it is his spirit you see here with us. We had his name inscribed in the House of Life.

As I told you, my husband also was a learned man. He liked nothing better than to go to all the temples of Memphis, and all other places of learning, to read the scrolls and the inscriptions on the walls and to talk with the scribes and priests of the place that he might increase his knowledge.

One day, there was a festival of the god Ptah, and a great procession was held in his honor. Na-nefer-kaptah was a pious man, so he went to the temple to do the honor that is right and proper for a god. My husband followed the procession, and as he walked along, he sometimes stopped to read the inscriptions that were there on the temple walls. While he was reading one of these inscriptions, he heard someone laughing. He turned and found that there was an old priest standing behind him, laughing at him.

"Why do you laugh?" asked my husband. "Should I not read the wise and holy things that are inscribed here?"

"Oh, I am not laughing at you," said the priest. "It is well to read wise and holy things, yes. But the ones you are reading, they really are of no good use. That is why I am laughing."

"Please explain," said Na-nefer-kaptah. "Why are these of no good use?"

The priest said to him, "I know of writings that are better. I know of a book that was written by none other than the great god Thoth himself. It is a book that contains only two spells, but they are the mightiest spells anyone could ever work. The first spell will give you the power to charm all of creation, the sky, the earth, the Underworld. It will give you understanding of the speech of birds, of serpents, of crocodiles. You will be able to see the fish in the ocean, no matter how deep they swim. The second spell will let you see Ra in all his glory, accompanied by the Nine Gods, and with them also the Moon. This you will be able to do whether as a living man in your own body or as a spirit in the Underworld."

Na-nefer-kaptah said to the priest, "Upon my soul, I will pay anything you ask that I might have this book!"

The priest told my husband, "I will show you where this book is if you give me a hundredweight of silver for my funeral and also the fee of

two priestly offices. And these I am to have without tax.”

Na-nefer-kaptah did as the priest asked. He arranged for the silver to be delivered and drew up documents that the priest might have the stipends without tax .

When all of this had been done, the priest said to Na-nefer-kaptah, “Take you to Coptos. The book is on an island there. On the island, you will find a box made of iron. Inside that box is a box made of copper. Inside the copper box is a box made of fragrant wood. Inside that box is one made of ebony and ivory. There is a box made of silver inside the one made of ebony and ivory, and inside that silver box is one made of gold. The book is inside the golden box. But have a care! The book is not there just for the taking. It is well protected, surrounded by many miles of scorpions, crocodiles, and poisonous snakes, and around the box itself is coiled a great serpent that cannot be killed.”

Na-nefer-kaptah was stunned by this news. He walked out of the temple, barely knowing where he was. When he came home I was concerned for him, for he seemed dazed.

“Husband,” I said. “What is wrong? Why do you seem bewildered?”

He told me all the priest had said and then told me, “I will do it. I will take a boat and sail to Coptos. I will find the book, and I will bring it back with me.”

I heard my husband’s words, and I was afraid. I went to the priest and I said to him, “I curse you for having told my husband these things. I bring down the curse of the gods upon you.”

Then I tried with all my might to prevent my husband from going to look for that book, but nothing I could say or do would dissuade him. Instead he went to Pharaoh. He told Pharaoh all that the priest had said to him. He asked for a boat, and a crew to sail it, and for permission to also bring me and our child, Merab, with him.

Pharaoh gave Na-nefer-kaptah all that he asked. When the boat was prepared, we boarded it together, myself, my husband, and our child. The priests of Isis at Coptos were told of our arrival. When we arrived, they and their wives greeted us well and made us their honored guests. We went to the temple of Isis and Harpocrates where Na-nefer-kaptah made sacrifice of an ox and a goose, and also poured out a libation of wine. When the sacrifice was completed, the priests showed us to a house where we might stay. It was a beautiful house, well appointed.

For four days we stayed in Coptos. Na-nefer-kaptah feasted with the priests of Isis, and I with their wives. On the fifth day, Na-nefer-kaptah made preparations for his journey. First, he obtained much pure wax and fashioned a boat along with its crew. Casting powerful magic, Na-

nefer-kaptah made the crew and the boat come alive. Na-nefer-kaptah set the magical boat in the water with its crew and then filled the boat Pharaoh gave him with sand, tying to the magical boat.

Soon enough all was ready. Na-nefer-kaptah took his leave of me and of our child. He boarded the magical boat and ordered the rowers to take him to the place where the Book of Thoth was kept. I stood on the shore, watching him row away, vowing not to leave that spot until he returned or until I heard news of what had befallen him.

The rowers rowed day and night. After three days, they reached the place where the Book of Thoth was. Na-nefer-kaptah looked around him, but all he could see was water. He realized that magic was needed, so he went to the boat Pharaoh had given him. He took the sand and cast it upon the river. The waters of the river parted, and an island appeared. As the priest had said, there were many miles of scorpions, poisonous snakes, and crocodiles prowling the whole island, and at its crown was the box of iron. A great serpent was coiled around the box, a serpent as thick as the body of a man and eight times as long.

Na-nefer-kaptah said a mighty spell, and the scorpions, snakes, and crocodiles made way for him. They stepped aside, and there was a path leading right to the box. When my husband approached the box, the great serpent reared up. It hissed and wove before him. Na-nefer-kaptah drew his sword and he fought with the serpent. He killed it, but the serpent came back to life. He fought the serpent again, killing it once more, but it came back to life a second time. Na-nefer-kaptah fought the serpent a third time, and it was a hard battle. Finally, he killed the serpent by cutting it in two. He piled sand in between the pieces of the serpent so that it could not put itself back together. It was dead for good this time.

Na-nefer-kaptah was weary after his battles with the serpent, but he was determined to get the book. He went to the box of iron and opened it. Inside, he found the box of copper. He continued to open the boxes until he finally reached the box of gold. Na-nefer-kaptah opened the box of gold, and inside was the Book of Thoth.

He took out the book and opened it. He recited the first spell and found that it worked. Na-nefer-kaptah had charmed the sky, the earth, the Underworld. He could understand the speech of birds, of serpents, of crocodiles. He could see the fish in the ocean, no matter how deep they were swimming. Then he made the second spell, and he was able to see Ra in all his glory, accompanied by the Nine Gods, and with them also the Moon.

Na-nefer-kaptah returned to his boat, boarding it. He then said a spell that made the island disappear back into the river and ordered the

rowers to take him back to Coptos. After three days, they arrived at Coptos. I was there, waiting for him, as I had promised. I had not moved from that spot from the day he departed. I had not eaten; I had not drunk. I looked like one who was ready to be embalmed.

I welcomed my husband back with great joy. I said to him, "Let me see this book for which we have both suffered much!"

He handed me the book, and I recited the first spell in it. I found I had charmed the sky, the earth, the Underworld. I could understand the speech of birds, of serpents, of crocodiles. I could see the fish in the ocean, no matter how deep they were swimming. Then I made the second spell, and I was able to see Ra in all his glory, accompanied by the Nine Gods, and with them also the Moon.

Now, I had only a little skill in writing, but Na-nefer-kaptah was a fine scribe. He had papyrus brought to him, and ink and pen, and he copied out the whole book. Then he called for a jug of beer. Taking the copy he had made, he placed it into the beer where the papyrus soon dissolved. Then Na-nefer-kaptah drank the beer with the dissolved papyrus in it, and he found that he knew all that was in the Book of Thoth without having to read it again.

We went back into the city of Coptos, where we did honor before Isis and Harpocrates in their temple. We made a feast with the priests and their wives. When the celebration was done, we boarded our boat and set sail for home.

Now, it came to Thoth's ears that Na-nefer-kaptah had found the island where his book was kept, that he had parted the throngs of poisonous, dangerous animals, that he had killed the immortal serpent, and that he had taken and used the book. Thoth was very angry. He went before Ra and said, "O Mighty Ra! Hear the complaint I make before you, about Na-nefer-kaptah, the son of Pharaoh Mernebptah, who has stolen my book. He went to the place where I had hidden it. He defeated all my guardians, even the serpent who could not be killed. He took the book and said the spells it contained. Be the judge of his actions and decide this case rightly!"

Ra heard the words of Thoth and considered his case. Ra said to Thoth, "Na-nefer-kaptah is yours to do with as you please, along with his family and servants."

Then the gods pronounced a curse upon us, saying, "You will never return to Memphis, nor will your family!"

We had not gone many miles on our journey when our son, Merab, came out onto the deck of the boat. He fell into the water. Everyone on board cried out when he fell, but no one was able to save him. The boy drowned for the water was too deep for us to reach him. Na-nefer-kaptah recited a spell which raised the body of our son up from the

water. My husband made the body of our son speak, and he told us that Thoth was angry at the theft of his book and that the gods had cursed our homeward journey.

We returned to Coptos where we took our son's body to the Good House. There the priests embalmed him, made a coffin for him, and tended him well as befits a person of rank. We mourned our dead child and placed him in his tomb.

Then Na-nefer-kaptah said to me, "We must go back to Memphis. We must tell Pharaoh what has befallen."

We got back into the boat and set sail once more. When we got to the place where our son Merab had drowned, I also came out onto the deck of the boat. I fell overboard and drowned for the water was too deep for anyone to reach me. Na-nefer-kaptah said a spell that raised my body from the water. My husband made my body speak, and I told him that Thoth was angry at the theft of his book and that the gods had cursed our homeward journey.

Once again, Na-nefer-kaptah returned to Coptos. He took my body to the Good House. There the priests embalmed me, made a coffin for me, and tended me well as befits a person of rank. My husband mourned me and placed me in my tomb.

Na-nefer-kaptah boarded the boat Pharaoh had given him and once again set out for Memphis. But when he reached the place where I and our son had drowned, he thought to himself, "What shall I tell Pharaoh, my father, of what has become of his daughter and his grandson? How can I return alive to him when his daughter and his grandson are dead because of what I have done?"

Na-nefer-kaptah took a band of linen. He bound the book to his body. Then he went out onto the deck of the boat Pharaoh had given him. He threw himself into the water and drowned for the water was too deep for anyone to reach him. All the crew lamented. "Alas! Alas for the son of Pharaoh! Such a learned man never there was! Such a scribe will never be seen again!"

The crew returned to Memphis and sent a messenger to tell Pharaoh all that had befallen. Pharaoh came down to the boat, dressed in mourning. All the court of Pharaoh and all the people of Memphis mourned for the death of Na-nefer-kaptah. All the priests of Ptah were in mourning, and all the household of Pharaoh. They came down to the dock and saw the boat of Pharaoh there, with her crew in mourning also. Then someone looked into the water and saw that the body of Na-nefer-kaptah was entangled with the rudder of the boat. He had enchanted his body to cling to the rudder so that he might be taken home and given a proper funeral.

Pharaoh ordered that the body of Na-nefer-kaptah be taken to the

Good House, that it might be properly embalmed and put in a coffin as befits a person of rank. Pharaoh also ordered that the book be hidden away.

Setne Khamwas Takes the Book

The spirit of Ahwere said to Khamwas. "That is my tale. You have heard what befell my husband and me and our child on account of that book. That book is not yours to take; we gave our very lives to have it!"

Khamwas said to Ahwere, "I care not for your tale. I wish to have that book, and I will take it, even if I have to do so by force!"

At that, Na-nefer-kaptah rose from his coffin. He said, "Who are you to hear this tale and take no account of it? Do you think you will be able to take the book by magic? Have you power to match mine? Or perhaps we can play at draughts for it?"

Setne Khamwas said, "Let us play at draughts."

They took out the game and set out the pieces. They played one game, and Na-nefer-kaptah won. He took the game box and hit Khamwas on the head with it. This made Khamwas sink into the earth up to his knees.

"Another game!" said Khamwas.

Again, they played draughts, and again Na-nefer-kaptah won. He took the box and hit Khamwas on the head with it once more. This made Khamwas sink into the earth up to his hips .

Then they played a third game, and the same thing happened, Na-nefer-kaptah won. He hit Khamwas on the head with the game box, and Khamwas sank into the ground, this time up to his ears.

Khamwas was in dire straits indeed. He called out to Inaros, his foster brother, who had been waiting for him outside the tomb. "Go to the house of Pharaoh," said Khamwas, "and tell him of all that has befallen. Then go fetch my amulets of Ptah and my books of magic and bring them here to me."

Inaros ran straight to the palace and did as Khamwas asked of him. Then he ran back to the tomb with the amulets and the books. He threw the amulets around the neck of Setne Khamwas, who immediately jumped up out of the earth. Khamwas then grabbed the Book of Thoth and ran out of the tomb.

Ahwere lamented as Khamwas and Inaros departed. She wailed loudly because the book had made light for her and now all was darkness. But her husband said to her, "Have no fear. I shall force him to bring the book back. And I will make him rue having taken it!"

Khamwas sealed the tomb behind him, then made his way to the palace where he told Pharaoh all that had befallen. Pharaoh shook his

head and said, "Bring the book back to the tomb straight away. Bring it back, or you surely will rue having taken it!"

But Khamwas did not listen to Pharaoh. He did nothing else but read from the book and speak of it and its wonders to anyone who would listen.

Setne Khamwas and Tabubu

One day, Khamwas went to the temple of Ptah to pray. As he came out of the temple, he saw a woman. She was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, as beautiful as a goddess. She was clothed in fine raiment and adorned with many jewels. Two maidservants there were with her, as well as two manservants. Khamwas saw her and greatly desired her. He was so overcome with desire that he did not know where he was. He called his servant to him and said, "Go, find out who that woman is and where she lives."

Khamwas' servant went to one of the woman's maidservants. He asked her, "Who is this, your mistress?"

The maidservant replied, "It is Tabubu, daughter of the prophet of Bastet and Lady of Ankhtawi. She is here to do honor to the god Ptah."

Khamwas' servant returned to his master and related all the maidservant had told him. Khamwas said to his servant, "Go again to the maidservant. Tell her this message to give to the Lady. Tell her, 'Setne Khamwas, son of Pharaoh Usmare, sends greetings. He says he will give you ten pieces of gold if you will but spend an hour with him. Or if you have a case before the court, or a complaint against anyone, he will see to it that things go in your favor. He will see to it that no harm comes to you for having spent time with him.'"

The servant went and did as Khamwas bid him, telling the maidservant everything Khamwas had said. The maidservant gave a cry of outrage. Tabubu saw her maid speaking with Khamwas' servant and heard her cry. Tabubu said, "Stop speaking to that man. If he has a message for me, bring him here that he might deliver it."

The servant went before the Lady and delivered Khamwas' message. He said, "Setne Khamwas, son of Pharaoh Usmare, sends greetings. He says he will give you ten pieces of gold if you will but spend an hour with him. Or if you have a case before the court, or a complaint against anyone, he will see to it that things go in your favor. He will see to it that no harm comes to you for having spent time with him."

Tabubu said, "Return to Setne Khamwas and give him this reply. Tell him I am a woman from a good family. I am a woman of high rank. I am not to be treated like a common whore. If Khamwas wishes to spend time with me, he must come to my house in Bubastis. There I have everything ready, and we may spend time together without my

having to behave like a low woman of no morals.”

The servant returned to Setne Khamwas and told him what Tabubu had said. Khamwas rejoiced at the news and vowed to go to Bubastis at once. But everyone who heard what he was going to do shook their heads and told him he should not go there, that he should leave Tabubu alone. But Khamwas would not listen.

Setne Khamwas boarded a boat and sailed directly to Bubastis. He went into the city and soon found a noble house, encircled by a strong wall with a fine garden within. Khamwas asked a passerby whose house it was, and the passerby told him it was the house of Tabubu. Khamwas went through the gate, where a servant saw him and went to announce him to Tabubu. Khamwas looked upon the fine garden while he waited. Soon Tabubu came down to him. She gave him good welcome and invited him to come upstairs with her.

When they arrived at the upstairs room, Khamwas looked around and saw what a fine room it was. The floor was inlaid with lapis lazuli and turquoise, and there were many couches, covered in fine upholstery. There was also a table, with golden cups and a golden flagon of wine. Tabubu poured a cup of wine and gave it to Khamwas. “Come and eat something,” she said.

Khamwas said, “I do not wish to eat.”

Tabubu’s servants brought incense to perfume the room. They put ointment on Khamwas’ body. Khamwas drank and spoke with Tabubu and was well attended by her servants. He desired Tabubu greatly, for he had never seen a woman to match her beauty.

Finally, Khamwas said to Tabubu, “Let us do that which I am here to do.”

Tabubu said, “No, you must return to your own home. I am a woman from a good family. I am a woman of high rank. I am not to be treated like a common whore. If you wish to have your desire, first we must send for a scribe. Dictate to him a stipend to be paid for me for the rest of my life. Dictate to him that all you own is to become mine.”

Setne Khamwas did as Tabubu bid him, and the documents were soon drawn up giving her the stipend and the rights to all his possessions. When this was done, a servant came upstairs. He told Khamwas that his children were waiting for him below. Khamwas said, “Let them come upstairs to us.”

Then Tabubu stood up and put on a robe of the finest linen. It was so fine and so sheer that Khamwas could see her whole body through it, and his desire became even greater. He said, “Let us do that which I am here to do.”

Tabubu replied, “No, you must return to your own home. I am a woman from a good family. I am a woman of high rank. I am not to

be treated like a common whore. If you wish to have your desire, first have your children sign the documents we have just drawn up. I do not wish them to dispute with my own children over your property.”

Khamwas’ children came upstairs. He told them to sign the documents, and they did so. Khamwas again said to Tabubu, “Let us do that which I am here to do.”

Tabubu said to him, “No, you must return to your own home. I am a woman from a good family. I am a woman of high rank. I am not to be treated like a common whore. If you wish to have your desire, you must kill your children. I do not wish them to dispute with my own children over your property.”

Khamwas said, “Horrible woman, that you would ask such a thing! Nevertheless, I cannot refuse you. Let it be done as you say.”

The children of Khamwas were killed in his presence, and their bodies given to the dogs and cats to eat. Then Khamwas said, “I have done everything you have asked of me, even having my own children killed. Let us now do that which I am here to do.”

Tabubu bid him follow her. She took him to a storehouse in the middle of the fine garden. Inside the storehouse was a finely carved bed, made of ebony and ivory. Tabubu lay upon the bed, and Khamwas lay next to her. He put out his hand to touch her, but she screamed.

Suddenly, Setne Khamwas found himself in the street, with no clothes on at all. He saw a procession approaching, with many servants carrying the litter of an important person. When they approached, Khamwas found that the person on the litter was none other than Pharaoh, his father. Khamwas was ashamed and tried to cover himself because he was completely naked.

Pharaoh looked at Khamwas and said, “Setne Khamwas, what is this? How do you come to be in the street without any clothes on? Are you drunk? ”

Khamwas said, “O Mighty Pharaoh, it is Na-nefer-kaptah who has done this to me!”

Pharaoh said, “Return to Memphis, my son. Your children have been asking for you.”

Khamwas said to Pharaoh, “O Mighty Pharaoh, may you live forever, how am I to get to Memphis without a stitch on?”

Pharaoh ordered that clothes be brought to Khamwas. He said to his son, “Now go you to Memphis. Your children have been asking for their father.”

Setne Khamwas Returns the Book

When Khamwas arrived in Memphis, he was overjoyed to find that his

children were alive. He embraced them warmly, and they gave him a good welcome.

Pharaoh took his son aside and said, "What were you doing there in the street completely naked? What madness was that?"

Khamwas told Pharaoh all that had befallen him. He said, "Na-nefer-kaptah wove a mighty spell. He made me desire a woman named Tabubu. He made it so that I could not refuse anything she asked of me, even killing my own children. I see now that it was all an illusion, all except finding myself in the street completely naked."

Pharaoh looked at his son. "Khamwas, you must take the book back to where it belongs. This time it was a spell of illusion, and it was humiliating for you. Next time who knows what Na-nefer-kaptah will do. Maybe he will kill you! If you did not listen to me before, my son, listen to me now. Take the book back and beg the forgiveness of Na-nefer-kaptah and of his lady wife, Ahwere."

Setne Khamwas saw the wisdom of Pharaoh's words. He went, repenting, to the tomb of Na-nefer-kaptah. There he found the spirit of Ahwere and her husband waiting for him.

"Praise be to Ptah," said Ahwere, "for bringing you back safely here."

Na-nefer-kaptah laughed and said to his wife, "See? Did I not tell you he would return the book?"

Khamwas greeted Na-nefer-kaptah and his wife well, and they greeted him. Khamwas put the book back where he had found it, and the dark tomb was suddenly full of light, almost as though the sun was shining.

Khamwas, trying to atone for his mistake, asked, "O Na-nefer-kaptah, what may I do to make amends?"

"You have heard the tale of Ahwere," said Na-nefer-kaptah. "So you know that her body and that of our son, Merab, lie in a tomb in Coptos. It is only by my magic that the three of us are united here in spirit. I will consider your debt paid if you would go to Coptos and fetch their bodies so that they may lie with mine here in this tomb. "

Khamwas then went to Pharaoh and told him what Na-nefer-kaptah had asked of him. Pharaoh agreed that this was a just payment and gave Khamwas a boat with a crew so that he might sail to Coptos and complete his errand. When Khamwas arrived there, he first went to the temple of Isis and Harpocrates, where he made sacrifice of an ox and a goose, and also poured out a libation of wine. He asked all the priests, scribes, and wise men of the place where he might find the tomb of Ahwere and Merab, but none knew where the place was.

Khamwas searched all over Coptos, visiting all the tombs and all the temples, reading all the inscriptions he could find. He searched for three days and still could not find the tomb of Ahwere and Merab. Now, Na-nefer-kaptah had been watching Khamwas as he searched.

He saw that Khamwas was having no success, so he took the form of a very old priest. Khamwas saw the old man and thought that maybe he might know something the younger priests and learned men did not.

"Tell me," said Khamwas, "do you know the place where the tomb of Ahwere and Merab is? For I have searched for three days and cannot find it."

The old man said to Khamwas, "This is a tale that I was told when I was young, by my grandfather who was told by his own father. The tale says that the tomb of Ahwere and Merab is underneath the house of the captain of the watch. You must dig under the house, and there you will find the tomb."

Khamwas thought for a moment about what the old man said. "Maybe you are telling me the truth," said Khamwas, "but maybe you are not. Has the captain of the watch done something to you, that you wish to harm him and his family by having his house destroyed?"

The old man said, "I am telling you the truth. But put me under guard while you dig for the tomb. If you find not the coffins of Ahwere and Merab, you may punish me in any way you think fitting."

Khamwas did as the old man said. First, he set a servant to watch the man, and then he gave orders to dig for the tomb, after explaining all to the captain. The workers came, and they dug. They did their work quickly and well, and soon they found the tomb of Ahwere and Merab. The coffins were put on Khamwas' boat, and Khamwas made sure that the captain's house was rebuilt just the same as it had been before.

Just as Khamwas was boarding the boat to return to Memphis, the old priest came to him and said, "I am Na-nefer-kaptah. It was I who told you where to look for the tomb of my wife and son. I did so because you were looking in good faith."

Then the boat set sail for Memphis, and soon enough it arrived in the city. Word was sent to Pharaoh that his son had returned with the coffins of Ahwere and Merab. Pharaoh ordered that the coffins were to be taken in solemn procession to the tomb of Na-nefer-kaptah, and it was done as he commanded. The coffins were placed in the tomb, with the proper rites and prayers being said for the souls of the dead ones, and all the nobles of the court made procession through it. Then Pharaoh ordered that the tomb be sealed up forever.

And there lie the bodies of Na-nefer-kaptah, his wife, and son, and also the Book of Thoth. And for all anyone knows, they lie there still.

Setne Khamwas and the Journey to the Underworld

The story of Setne Khamwas' journey to the Underworld with his son, Si-Osire, survives on a papyrus from the Roman period. Lichtheim notes the

parallels in this tale between the parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), where the rich man ends up in an afterlife of torment while the poor man goes to Heaven. This story of Khamwas' journey also influenced Greek thought. The scene with the souls eternally trying to grab food and water that are out of their reach is clearly reminiscent of the punishment of Tantalus in Greek mythology.

The tale of the Nubian sorcerer rounds out the cycle of Khamwas stories. It is engagingly written, and contains a lovely twist at the end. Nubia was a traditional rival to Egypt in ancient times, and this rivalry is reflected in the obvious distaste that the narrator and the characters have for all things Nubian. The story also participates in the Hermopolitan tradition of regarding Thoth as the primary creator-god.

Setne Khamwas was the son of Pharaoh Usmares. He was a scribe, a magician, and the most learned man ever to live in the land of Egypt. Khamwas had a wife named Mehusekhe, whom he loved very much, and she loved him. But they had one great sorrow: they did not have a son. Both Khamwas and Mehusekhe prayed to the gods to give them a son, but to no avail. They went to the temple and made offerings, burnt sacrifices, and poured out libations, but still they had no son.

"Husband," said Mehusekhe, "we have prayed and offered sacrifice, but still we have no son. You are the wisest man in Egypt. What else might we do to earn the gods' favor or, at the very least, their pity?"

Setne Khamwas thought for a moment, then said, "Go to the temple and pour out libation as we did before. Pray to the gods and beg their favor. Then sleep the night in the temple precincts. Perhaps the gods will favor us then, or at the very least pity us, and give us a son."

Mehusekhe saw the wisdom in what Khamwas proposed, so she did as her husband instructed. She went to the temple. She poured out libation. And when night came, she slept in the temple precincts, and while she was sleeping, she had a dream.

In the dream, a god came to her and said, "Mehusekhe! Wife of Setne Khamwas! We have received your offerings, burnt sacrifices, and your libations. We see that you sleep in the temple and wish to be favored with a son. Do as I instruct, and you will receive your desire. Go to the place where your husband likes to bathe. Nearby, there is a melon vine growing. Find a branch of the vine that has some fruit growing on it. Break it off, take it home, and grind it into a potion. Drink that potion, and then lie with your husband that very night. Then you will be favored with a son."

Mehusekhe awoke from her dream, doing as the god instructed. She found the melon vine with its fruit and ground it into a potion. Once she drank the potion, she laid with her husband. Soon she found she was with child. Mehusekhe rejoiced, and she told Khamwas who also

rejoiced. He made an amulet to protect his wife and his unborn child. Then Khamwas said magic spells over Mehusekhe so that the babe would not only grow well and strong, but be born easily.

One night, Setne Khamwas had a dream. In his dream, a voice said to him, "Setne Khamwas! Husband of Mehusekhe! Listen! Your wife is with child. She shall bear a son. You are to name him Si-Osire. He will be a wonderful child and work many marvels!" Khamwas awoke from the dream, rejoicing at what he had been told.

Soon enough, it was time for the babe to be born. Mehusekhe was delivered of a fine male child, and Khamwas named him Si-Osire as the dream had instructed him. Mehusekhe and Khamwas loved their son. They cared for him well, and he grew into a fine boy.

As the dream had foretold, Si-Osire was a marvellous child. He was quick to learn, and all wondered at how well he understood things. When he was old enough, Khamwas enrolled him in school. Only a few months later, Si-Osire's teacher came to speak to the boy's parents. "Honored parents of Si-Osire," he said, "I cannot teach your son any longer."

Khamwas and Mehusekhe became concerned. "Why can you not teach our son?" they asked.

"I cannot teach him because there is nothing left to teach," said the man. "He has already learned from me everything I know."

After that, Si-Osire went to sit with the priests in the House of Life at the temple. He would recite all the prayers and scriptures with the priests there, and soon he knew these all by heart even better than the priests did. Everyone who met him thought him the most marvellous child, and they wondered at his learning. Mehusekhe and Khamwas rejoiced that they had been given such a fine son by the gods.

Setne Khamwas then determined that it was time to have his son presented at court. He went to the Pharaoh and said, "O Mighty Pharaoh, my father, may you live forever. I have come to ask that you hold a banquet so that my son Si-Osire may be presented before the court."

Pharaoh Usmares heard the words of his son and said, "It shall be done as you ask."

On the day of the banquet, Khamwas and Si-Osire were preparing themselves to be present in the court of Pharaoh, to dine with him and the nobles. Suddenly, there was a great wailing outside. The father and son looked out the window to see what the matter was. They saw two funeral processions: one of a very rich man and another of a very poor man. The din was coming from the funeral attendants of the rich man. There were many people wailing for him, as servants transported the fine and richly decorated coffin down the street. The poor man,

though, was wrapped in a simple reed mat, and the only attendants he had were the ones who carried his body to its grave.

"May it please the gods," said Khamwas, "that when I die, I have such a funeral as that rich man there and that I have such a welcome in the Underworld as surely awaits him!"

Si-Osire grasped his father's arm. He was greatly afraid. "Oh no, Father! Wish not for such things! Wish for yourself anything but the welcome that awaits that rich man in the Underworld! Wish instead for the welcome that awaits the poor man!"

Setne Khamwas looked down at his son. "What is this that you say to me, my son?"

Si-Osire said, "I can show you what will happen to those men, if you will but follow me."

Si-Osire led his father out into the desert. They walked westward for many miles. They followed the course of the sun. When the sun had set, they came to a portal, and they walked through it. They walked through into a place that was very, very dark. They had left the land of the living and were in the Underworld.

The father and son walked the path that led through the Underworld. They walked through many chambers. In one chamber were some men who were plaiting ropes. But as fast as they could make the ropes, donkeys were chewing them up.

In another chamber were people who hungered and thirsted. Loaves of bread and jugs of water were hung from the ceiling above them, but whenever the people tried to take the food and drink, others around them would dig a pit at their feet, so they would not be able to reach.

They came to another hall where there were many noble spirits standing in fine array. At the door of the hall were those who had been accused of crimes. They stood before the door, pleading for mercy. Khamwas and Si-Osire heard a great wailing at the door. They looked about trying to find who it was that lamented so. Then they looked down, and there they saw that the doorpost of the hall had been fixed through the eye of a man who lay at the foot of the door. It was he who was crying out in anguish.

They walked through many other halls and finally came into the Hall of Judgement. There was the god Osiris. He was seated on a golden throne, wearing the *atef* crown. Anubis stood on his left, and Thoth stood on his right. The rest of the council of the gods was arrayed about the chamber. In the center of the chamber was a great balance in which was weighed the deeds of the newly dead, with good deeds on one side and bad deeds on the other. Anubis weighed the deeds and dictated the result to Thoth, who wrote everything in his book.

If a soul had committed more bad deeds than good, then his *ba* and

his body are consumed by the Ammit, the Devourer, and the person is destroyed forever. If a soul has committed more good deeds than bad, then he becomes one of the gods that stand in the Hall of Judgement, and his *ba* goes to live in the heavens with Ra. Souls whose good and bad deeds that weigh the same remain in the Underworld as servants of Osiris .

Khamwas and Si-Osire saw a long line of souls awaiting judgement in the Hall where Osiris and the council of the gods were waiting. Si-Osire said, "Father! Do you not see that man there, clad in the finest clothing and decked in gold? Look, he is the one standing near Osiris. That is the poor man whose funeral procession we just saw, the one who had no attendants save those who carried his body and who was wrapped in a reed mat. His deeds were weighed on the balance by Anubis and written down by Thoth. It was found that his good deeds outweighed the bad ones, and so he is among those favored by the gods. Osiris ordered that the funeral array of the rich man be given to the poor man and that the poor man stand among the gods next to Osiris himself."

"What then became of the rich man?" asked Khamwas.

"The rich man also was taken to the Hall of Judgement. His deeds were weighed on the balance by Anubis and recorded by Thoth. And it was found that his bad deeds far outnumbered his good ones. Osiris ordered that he be kept in the Underworld forever. It was he who lay at the foot of the door, wailing, with the doorpost in his eye. This is why I told you not to wish for the welcome that awaited the rich man and instead wish for what awaited the poor one. I knew what would befall each of them!"

Khamwas wondered at all the things he had seen in the Underworld. Then he said to his son, "I wish to know more of what we have seen. What of the people plaiting ropes and those trying to reach bread and water?"

Si-Osire said, "The people plaiting ropes are under a curse. In life, they labored without ceasing, but their wives took all their pay and squandered it, so they could never better their lot. But when they were brought to the Hall of Judgement, they were found to have more bad deeds than good. Osiris ordered that it should go with them in the Underworld as it did in life, to work unceasingly but make no progress. They who reach for the bread and the water are those who had every good thing in life, but did bad deeds, and now they are deprived of good things in death.

"O my Father, hear what I say! This is how it befalls the souls of the dead. Those who lived lives full of bad deeds shall have those deeds revisited upon them a hundredfold with no escape, but those who

lived lives full of good deeds will be favored of the gods!"

When Si-Osire finished speaking, Khamwas found himself and his son returned to Memphis. Khamwas embraced his son and took the boy's hand in his own. "How is it that we are come back?" asked Khamwas. "Did we return the way we went?" But Si-Osire gave his father no answer.

Si-Osire continued to learn and to grow. By the time he was twelve years old, there was not a single scribe, priest, or learned man in all of Egypt to compare with him in wisdom or in magical power.

The Nubian Sorcerer

Some time after Khamwas and Si-Osire returned from their journey to the Underworld, a prince of the Nubian people arrived at the court of Pharaoh Usmares. The Nubian prince had a document strapped to his body. The document was folded with the writing on the inside, and it was sealed with a great wax seal. The Nubian's arrival was announced to Pharaoh, and he was brought before the whole court.

The Nubian greeted Pharaoh and his court and said, "I am here, a prince of Nubia, with a document strapped to my body. I am come to see whether there is any in the land of Egypt who can read this document without first removing it from me. If there is none to be found, I shall return to Nubia and I shall say that Egypt is a land of no wisdom and no learning and no magic, and great shall be the shame of Egypt in Nubia!"

Pharaoh and all his court were stunned by the words of the Nubian. "How can anyone read a document without opening it first?" they said, and they worried that Egypt's shame would be great throughout all Nubia.

But Pharaoh said, "Go and fetch my son, Setne Khamwas!"

Soon enough, Khamwas arrived at the court of Pharaoh. He went before Pharaoh, and bowed low. "O Mighty Pharaoh, may you live forever, what is it you require of me?" he said.

"My son," said Pharaoh, "Here before us stands a prince of Nubia. He wears a document strapped to his body. He has challenged us to find the one in Egypt who can read it without removing it. Know you of any one who has this power?"

Setne Khamwas heard the words of Pharaoh, and was stunned. "Mighty Pharaoh, who is there who can read a document without opening it? But if you grant me the space of ten days, I shall do what I can to find the one who can do this thing, that Egypt should not be greatly shamed throughout all Nubia."

Pharaoh said, "The ten days are granted."

Pharaoh then ordered that a chamber be prepared for the Nubian, and that food and drink prepared in the Nubian fashion be brought to him.

Then Pharaoh went from the council chamber and retired to his own rooms, where he lay with a heavy heart. He was sure that no one would be found who could answer the Nubian's challenge, and great would be the shame of Egypt.

Khamwas likewise went to his own home. And like Pharaoh, he also despaired. For who could read a document without opening it? He went into his home. He refused food and drink. He went up to his chamber and lay down upon his bed. He wrapped his garments around him and would not speak.

Mehusekhe, the wife of Setne Khamwas, saw that her husband was troubled. She went to him and said, "O my husband, what is it that grieves you? "

Khamwas replied, "Leave me, O my wife. That which troubles me is not fit business for a woman."

Mehusekhe left her husband alone, sorrowing that she could not help him.

Next the boy Si-Osire went to his father. "O my father, tell me what it is that grieves you."

Khamwas replied, "Leave me, O my son. That which troubles me is not fit business for a child."

But Si-Osire said, "Tell me, Father, please. It will make your heart lighter to speak your grief."

Khamwas said, "A Nubian came to the court of Pharaoh today, with a document strapped to his body. He says that one must be found who can read the document without removing it, or great will be the shame of Egypt throughout all Nubia. That is why I am troubled. For who can read a document without opening it first?"

Si-Osire heard his father's words and began to laugh.

Khamwas frowned, thinking the boy was mocking him. "Why are you laughing, O my son?" he said.

"I am laughing because what the Nubian asks is but the simplest thing," said Si-Osire, "and here you are hiding in your chamber because of it! Get up, Father, and do not be troubled further. I can read that document without removing it, and without breaking the seal."

Khamwas wondered at this and said, "I must have proof that what you say is true, my son."

Si-Osire replied, "I shall stay here while you go downstairs to the bookshelf. Pick any book you like and look at it. Say nothing, but wait for me to call down to you. I will say what book you hold, and what is in it."

Khamwas did as Si-Osire instructed. He went to the bookshelf and

picked up a book. Si-Osire called down the title of the book, and began reciting what was inside. Khamwas had Si-Osire try another book, and then another. Soon it became clear that the boy could read a document without even having to be in the same room with it. Surely Egypt's honor would be saved!

Khamwas went straight to Pharaoh. He related to Pharaoh all that Si-Osire had done. Pharaoh rejoiced. He called for a banquet to be held, and invited Khamwas and Si-Osire as guests of honor.

The next morning, Pharaoh held court with all his nobles. He sent for the Nubian prince. The prince came, and the document was still fastened upon him. Pharaoh bid him stand in the center of the court, before himself and all the nobles. Then he called the boy Si-Osire to stand before the court.

Si-Osire turned to the Nubian and said, "Prince of Nubia! You come here to Egypt, the very garden of Osiris and the footrest of Ra, with bold words and threats. May Amen strike you down for your insolence! I am here to say what is in that document. I shall speak its contents true, before you and before Pharaoh, the mightiest of kings, may he live for ever, and before the court of Pharaoh. And you shall not lie about what is in that document. I shall speak true, and so shall you!"

The Nubian looked upon Si-Osire, standing before him in the court of Pharaoh, and he bowed. "I also shall speak true about what is in that document."

Then Si-Osire began to recite what was written in the document. And Pharaoh and Khamwas and all the court of Egypt listened to his tale.

"Once, long ago, was the time of Pharaoh Menkh-Pre-Sia-Mun. He was a good Pharaoh, and under his rule Egypt prospered. At that time there also was a king in Nubia, who was making holiday in the woods of Amen, and he rested in his tent. As he rested, he overheard three of his magicians talking. One of them said, 'If Amen thought not ill of it, and if Pharaoh could not smite me, I would cast such a spell upon Egypt that the whole land would be under nothing but darkness for three whole days!'

"The second magician said, 'If Amen thought not ill of it, and if Pharaoh could not smite me, I would cast such a spell that Pharaoh would be compelled to come to Nubia, where he would receive 500 lashes of a cane in public before our own king, and then have him returned to Egypt in dishonor, all in the space of six hours!'

"The third magician said, 'If Amen thought not ill of it, and if Pharaoh could not smite me, I would cast such a spell upon Egypt that the whole land would become barren, and stay that way for three years!'

"The king of Nubia had these three magicians brought before him

straight away. 'Which of you said he would cast Egypt into darkness for three whole days?' he said.

" 'It was I, Horus-son-of-the-Sow,' said the first magician.

" 'Which of you said that he would have Pharaoh receive 500 lashes of a cane in public, and be returned to Egypt in dishonor?' said the king of Nubia.

" 'It was I, Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman,' said the second magician.

" 'Which of you said that he would make Egypt barren for three years?' said the Nubian king.

" 'It was I, Horus-son-of-the-Princess,' said the third magician.

"The Nubian king turned to the second magician, he who would have Pharaoh caned. 'Work your magic!' he said. 'By the great god Amen, if you make good your boast, you will be richly rewarded!'

"Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman called for a quantity of wax. With the wax, he made a litter and four servants to carry it. He said a magic spell, and the litter and its bearers came to life. 'Go to Egypt,' the magician commanded, 'and take up Pharaoh upon your litter. Bring him back here, that he may be stricken with a cane 500 times. Then you are to return him to his own land. All this must be done in six hours!'

"The wax servants bowed and said it would be done thus.

"That night, the wax servants flew to Egypt. They captured Pharaoh, and he could not resist them. They brought him to Nubia, where he was caned with 500 lashes in public before the Nubian king. Then the wax servants returned Pharaoh to his palace. All was complete in six hours."

Si-Osire paused in his recitation. "May Amen strike you down if you do not say true," he said to the Nubian. "Are those not the words written upon the document you carry?"

The Nubian bowed and said, "They are the very words. Please continue."

Si-Osire again began to speak.

"When morning came, Pharaoh sent for his counsellors. Pharaoh said to them, 'What happened in Egypt, while I was away?'

"The counsellors were in great confusion, for as far as they knew, Pharaoh had never left. 'What is this you say, O Pharaoh, may you live forever? What madness this? You have been nowhere but here. Your servants saw you to your chamber last night as usual, and this morning you called us to yourself.'

" 'I was kidnapped,' said Pharaoh, 'and taken to Nubia, where I was given 500 lashes with a cane before the Nubian king, and then I was

returned here. All this happened within six hours.’ And he showed them the welts upon his back. The counsellors and the servants all lamented loudly and felt great pity for Pharaoh, for his back was well bruised and he was in pain.

“Then Pharaoh sent for his most learned magician, a man named Horus-son-of-Paneshe. When Horus-son-of-Paneshe came before Pharaoh and saw the wounds on his back, he lamented, and then he became angry at the indignity Pharaoh had suffered. Pharaoh said to him, ‘Quick, work your magic! I do not wish to be taken to Nubia again tonight!’

“Horus-son-of-Paneshe went and fetched his amulets and books of magic. He recited many good spells over Pharaoh, and put magic amulets on him, to prevent the magic of the Nubians from taking hold ever again. Then Horus-son-of-Paneshe went to Hermopolis, to the temple of Thoth that was there. He made many prayers, with offerings and libations, saying, ‘O Mighty Thoth! Hear my prayer! The Nubians wish to bring shame upon Egypt. You are the author of all magic. You put the sky in its place, you created the earth and the Underworld. Tell me what I must do to save Pharaoh from the Nubians!’

“That night, Horus-son-of-Paneshe slept in the temple, and in his sleep he dreamed a dream. He heard the voice of Thoth speaking to him, saying, ‘Are you Horus-son-of-Paneshe, he who is magician to Pharaoh? In the morning, go you to my temple, and go you to the library that is within it. Inside the library is a chamber. The chamber is locked. Unlock it, and inside you will find a book of writings that I wrote with my own hand. Take the book. Copy it well. When it is copied, put it back and lock the chamber. The spells in that book are very powerful. They protect me, and they will also protect Pharaoh from the magic of the Nubians.’

“Horus-son-of-Paneshe woke from his dream, and did all that the god Thoth commanded of him. He used the magic spells in the book to make new and powerful amulets with which to protect Pharaoh. He returned to the palace, where he put the amulets on Pharaoh and said new spells to protect him from the Nubian sorcerers.

“That night, the Nubians thought again to shame Pharaoh. Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman made his magic again. But when the wax figures arrived at Pharaoh’s palace, they had no power over him, because of the strength of the amulets Horus-son-of-Paneshe had made, and because of the strength of his spells. The following morning, Pharaoh told Horus-son-of-Paneshe what had happened, and that the Nubians had been unable to take him because he was so well protected.

“Then Horus-son-of-Paneshe obtained a great quantity of wax, and

with it made four servants and a litter. He said a mighty spell, making the servants and the litter come alive. He said to the wax servants, 'Go you to Nubia. Capture the Nubian king. Bring him here, and beat him with 500 strokes of a cane. Then return him to his palace. Do all this in the space of six hours.'

"The wax servants bowed and said it would be done as they were commanded. They flew by magic to Nubia, and overpowered the king. They brought the Nubian king before Pharaoh, where he was stricken with 500 strokes of a cane. Then they brought him back to his own palace. All this was done in the space of six hours."

Si-Osire paused in his recitation. "May Amen strike you down if you do not say true," he said to the Nubian. "Are those not the words written upon the document you carry?"

The Nubian bowed and said, "They are the very words. Please continue."

Si-Osire again began to speak.

"In the morning, the Nubian king called to him his nobles. He said to them, 'Behold, in the night I was overpowered and taken before Pharaoh in the land of Egypt, where I was stricken with 500 blows of a cane, and then I was brought back home again.' The Nubian king showed his back to his nobles, and they lamented greatly at his many wounds.

"Then the king sent for the magician Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman. 'The curse of Amen be upon you! It was your thought to shame the Pharaoh of Egypt by bringing him here to be beaten, and now his sorcerers have done the same to me. Find a way to protect me, for I fear they will make another attempt tonight!'

"Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman wove many spells around the Nubian king, and put many amulets upon him, but to no avail. That night, Horus-son-of-Paneshe sent his wax servants to Nubia, and again the king was brought to Egypt where he was beaten with a cane in the presence of Pharaoh and then returned to his home in Nubia, all within the space of six hours. This happened across three more days, for the magic of the Nubians was no match for that of Horus-son-of-Paneshe.

"When the Nubian king found that nothing could protect him from the magic of the Egyptians, he called to him Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman. 'May the curse of Amen be upon you forevermore! None of your magic is of any help at all. Nightly I am taken to the palace of Pharaoh, and nightly am I humiliated in his presence. Make a magic that will protect me, or by all the gods your death shall be as slow and as painful as I can devise!'

"Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman said, 'O My Lord King, let me go to

Egypt. I shall stand before the one who has cast spells against you, and I shall contend with him in magic. I shall defeat him there in his own land, and he will trouble you no more.'

"The king agreed that this should be done. Before departing for Egypt, Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman went to visit his mother. He told her what had been happening and what he intended to do. She said to him, 'Do not go to Egypt! They have many fine sorcerers, more powerful than you. Do not go there, for if you do, you will never come home to Nubia ever again!'

"But Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman replied, 'I have no choice. I must go to Egypt if I am to work the magic that will save our king from further shame.'

"His mother said, 'If you must go, you must. But let us agree on a sign that I will see if evil befalls you in the land of Egypt, and that way I will know to come and help you.'

"They agreed that if evil befell Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman, that the food and drink of his mother would turn blood red, and that the sky also would become the color of blood, and that would be the sign that she must go to his aid.

"That done, Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman went to Egypt. He went to Memphis, to the court of Pharaoh. He went before the court and said, 'Doomed are you, sorcerers of the land of Egypt! Doomed are you who contend with me in feats of magic, and who send magic curses upon the king of Nubia!'

"Horus-son-of-Paneshe heard these words and was angered. He stood before the court of Pharaoh and said, 'Doomed are you, vile Nubian! I know who you are. Are you not Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman? Do you not recall the time when we were together in the garden of Ra, and you and your companion fell into the water there, and I rescued you? And now you work foul magic that does wrong against Pharaoh, your rightful lord, and you come to Egypt complaining about spells being cast on the king of Nubia. Surely the one who is doomed is you, since the gods saw fit to bring you to Egypt to face the punishment you deserve!'

"Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman scoffed at this. 'Horus-son-of-Paneshe, I do indeed know you. Do you not remember that I taught you how to speak the language of wolves? Do you indeed say that you will stand against me in a contest of magic? '

"Then the Nubian sorcerer said a mighty spell, and a great fire broke out in the middle of Pharaoh's court. Pharaoh and his nobles cried out in fear, for the fire was very hot, and it was tall enough to lick the rafters of the palace. But Horus-son-of-Paneshe did not cry out, and he was not afraid. He said a mighty spell of his own, and a great rain

began to fall on the court, putting out the fire instantly.

“Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman made another spell. First there was a rushing of wind, and then a deep darkness fell upon the court. Pharaoh and his nobles cried out in fear, for it was so dark they could not see anything, no matter how they tried. But Horus-son-of-Paneshe did not cry out, and he was not afraid. He said a mighty spell of his own, which stilled the wind and dispelled the darkness.

“The Nubian sorcerer was not dismayed. He said a third spell, one that built up walls and a roof of stone around the court of Pharaoh. Pharaoh and all his nobles were now trapped within a great tomb of stone, and they cried out in fear. But Horus-son-of-Paneshe did not cry out, and he was not afraid. He said a mighty spell of his own. He created a spell-boat out of papyrus to carry the tomb of stone away from Pharaoh’s court. He put the tomb onto the boat, and it flew away through the sky to the sea. When it arrived at the sea, it fell into the water with its burden, and both sank to the bottom.

“When Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman saw this, he knew he would never defeat the Egyptian magician, and he became greatly afraid. He said a spell that turned himself invisible, thinking that he might escape the court that way. But the Nubian sorcerer was no match for Horus-son-of-Paneshe. The Egyptian magician said a counterspell, and the Nubian was instantly plain to see by all. At this, Horus-son-of-the-Nubian-Woman turned himself into a gander, thinking to fly away, but Horus-son-of-Paneshe said a counterspell, and the Nubian found himself in his gander-shape in the clutches of a fowler who was ready to kill him with a knife.

“Just as the Nubian sorcerer was taken by the fowler, the sorcerer’s mother sat down to a meal. She found that her food and drink had turned the color of blood. She looked up at the sky and found that it had turned the color of blood as well. She turned herself into a goose and flew to Egypt, where she flew around the court of Pharaoh, calling out for her son. Horus-son-of-Paneshe heard her call. He looked up and saw the goose circling the court, and knew her to be the mother of the Nubian sorcerer. Horus-son-of-Paneshe said a mighty spell that brought her down and placed her in the clutches of a fowler, just as had happened to her son.

“At this, the Nubian woman changed back into her own form. She fell on her knees before Horus-son-of-Paneshe and said, ‘Have mercy upon us! Do us no harm! We beg your forgiveness for the wrong we have done to Pharaoh, and the shame we have brought upon Egypt! If you let us go, we will return to Nubia in peace and never say spells against you ever again!’

“Horus-son-of-Paneshe said, ‘I will let you go on one condition: you

must swear never to come back to Egypt ever again, for any reason. ’
“The woman agreed, saying, ‘I so swear. I shall not return to Egypt for 1,500 years.’

“Horus-son-of-Paneshe accepted the word of the Nubian woman. He released her and her son from his spell, and sent them back home to Nubia by magic.”

Thus Si-Osire finished his tale, before Pharaoh and before his father, Setne Khamwas, and before all the court. The Nubian stood before them as well, with his head bowed down. Si-Osire pointed to the Nubian and said, “I swear by the very life of Pharaoh, may he live forever, that this Nubian who stands before the court is none other than the Nubian woman of the tale. The 1,500 years of her oath is up, and she has returned to Egypt to make more mischief. I swear also by the great Osiris, god of the Underworld where I, too, reside, that I am Horus-son-of-Paneshe. In the Underworld, it came to my ears that the Nubian woman planned to return to Pharaoh’s court to work magic against him, but that there was none here who could withstand her spells. I asked permission of the Lord Osiris that I be reborn so that I could protect Pharaoh and the land of Egypt from her, and Osiris granted that it should be so.

“I placed myself within the melon plant, so that I would be reborn again as the child of Setne Khamwas and Mehusekhe. I did this so that when the time came, I could stand against the sorcerer from Nubia and shield Egypt from her mischief.”

Then Si-Osire made a mighty spell. He made a great fire come up around the Nubian, and soon the sorcerer was reduced to ash in the presence of Pharaoh and all his nobles. When this was done, Si-Osire himself vanished, as though he had never been there at all. Pharaoh and the nobles exclaimed in wonder, saying that surely there would never be such a magician in Egypt ever again, but Setne Khamwas wailed in lament, for Si-Osire was his son and he loved him greatly.

Pharaoh’s heart was full of all the things he had heard and seen, but he did not forget the sorrow of Setne Khamwas. Pharaoh did what he could to comfort his son over the loss of Si-Osire.

That night, Khamwas went home, still grieving for Si-Osire. He told his wife all that had happened that day. Then they lay down together and took delight in one another, and soon thereafter Mehusekhe found she was with child. When the time came, she was delivered of a fine baby boy, and they named him User-Mont-Hor.

But for the rest of his life, Setne Khamwas made offerings and poured out libations to Horus-son-of-Paneshe, who had saved the honor of Egypt not once, but twice, and who for a little time, at least, had been his beloved son.

SELECT GLOSSARY

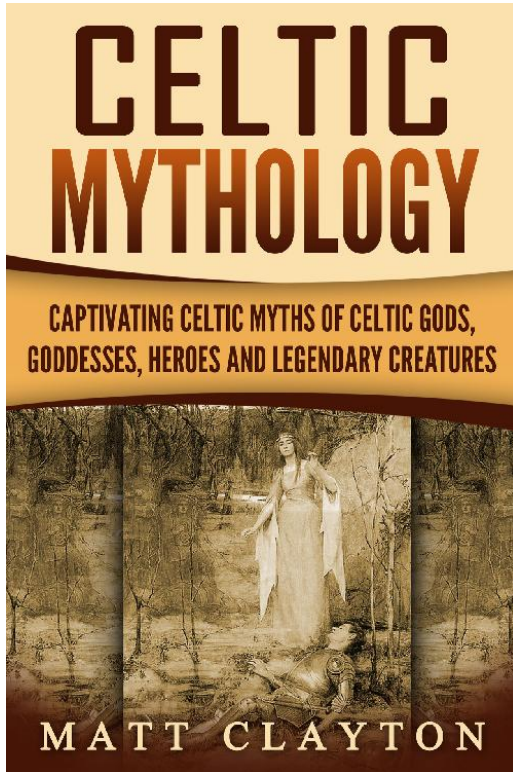
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Section 4: Celtic Mythology

Captivating Celtic Myths of Celtic Gods, Goddesses, Heroes and Legendary Creatures



Introduction

Giants and fairies, druidical magic, impossible deeds done by heroes: all of these are features of Celtic myths and legends. Stories such as these are all that remain of the mythos of the ancient Celts, a people whose language and culture once covered a wide swath of continental Europe and extended into Ireland, Scotland, England, and Wales. However, Celtic culture and language diminished under the expansion of the Roman Empire and the advent of Christianity; its decline was well advanced by the early Middle Ages. Today, what remains of Celtic cultures may largely be found only in Brittany in northwestern France, and in Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

We have no ancient sources for the stories of the Celts, which originally were passed down orally. Irish monks wrote versions of their native tales starting in the eighth century, while the Welsh redactions survive in manuscripts dating from the twelfth century onwards, and Cornish legends were never captured at all. Breton tales were written down even later, in close to modern times: the *Barzazh Breiz* , a collection of Breton folk songs that includes the story of the drowned City of Ys, was first published in 1839, leading to some controversy over their authenticity as representatives of ancient Breton myth and legend.

The impact first of Romanization and then the advent of Christianity on the transmission of these tales cannot be underestimated. The imposition of a new culture and new religion resulted in the loss of the original Celtic mythos, including any cosmological narratives. We now find only echoes of this original mythos in physical artefacts such as the Gundestrup Cauldron, or Neolithic tomb carvings; in the few descriptions of the Celts and their beliefs from Roman sources; or in stories such as the Irish tales of the Tuatha De Danann, or simply the Tuatha De ("people of the goddess Danu" and "tribe of the gods," respectively), who are extraordinarily beautiful, gifted warriors, learned in magic and near-immortal.

When they were finally recorded by Christian scribes, the original myths became watered down as some of the old gods were turned into superhuman heroes, while others were banished to their mounds in a mysterious and perilous Otherworld, the land of Faerie. The latter is in fact a reimagining of the function of mounded tombs made in ancient times, which kept their association with the pagan gods through their transformation into the homes of the *Sidhe* , or fairy-folk. These once-powerful beings are sometimes even further diminished when they are seen as magical, small winged creatures, the fairies and pixies who play pranks on clumsy humans.

The stamp of Christianity on the Celtic mythos can be seen in Ireland, particularly, where monks concocted pseudo-histories and linked these to Biblical tales, partly in an attempt to reconcile the ancient pagan stories with the new Christian faith. They did this, for example, by making the old gods in their guise as the Tuatha De one of several groups who invade Ireland and take up residence there, but only centuries after the granddaughter of Noah leads a group of her own people there from Palestine in an attempt to escape the Flood. Irish scribes also attempted to further valorize these pseudo-histories by claiming Irish connections to ancient Greece, in much the same way as the Romans had tried to boost their own legitimacy by claiming descent from the hero Aeneas after the fall of Troy. In these instances, exiles from Ireland go to Greece for a time where they grow strong and sometimes acquire magical learning (part of the history of the Tuatha De) before returning to Ireland once again. Modern scholars have grouped Irish myths into one of three basic cycles: the Mythological Cycle, which contains the pseudo-histories and stories of god-heroes such as Lug and Lir; the Ulster Cycle, which contains the epic Tain Bo Cuailgne ("Cattle Raid of Cooley") and the Cuchulainn legends; and the Fenian Cycle, which tells the stories of Finn Mac Cumhaill, another hero similar in some ways to Cuchulainn. Of these, only one of the Mythological Cycle legends and some of the Cuchulainn stories are told here.

Welsh myths usually are referred to under the umbrella term *Mabinogion* . The *Mabinogion* is divided into four groupings known as "branches," each of which involves the adventures of a particular protagonist. The first branch is about Pwyll of Dyfed and is retold here. The other three branches tell the stories of Branwen daughter of Llyr, Manawydan son of Llyr, and Math son of Mathonwy, in that order. In addition to the four branches of the *Mabinogion* , there are a handful of so-called "native tales" that include the story of Culhwch and Olwen, which is also included in this collection.

Brittany is represented here by the tale of the drowned City of Ys from the *Barzazh Breiz* . This story has distinctly Celtic elements even if it never was an actual Celtic myth. Cornwall is represented by the story of Tristan and Iseult, a medieval Arthurian legend that has resonances with the ancient Irish tale "The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne."

PART I

Ireland

The Children of Lir

This story is a perfect example of the ways Irish myth became filtered through a Christian lens in the Middle Ages. With very few exceptions, the characters of the story are all members of the Tuatha De Danann, who are a kind of echo of the old Celtic gods: they have magical powers, and if they are not quite immortal, they live hundreds of times longer than normal humans. In this story, the Children of Lir—whose name means "sea" and who apparently was some kind of Celtic ocean god—are turned into swans by their evil stepmother. In this form, they wander the world for more than nine hundred years, and their enchantment is only reversed after the Christianization of Ireland, when the rest of the Tuatha De have departed forever.

The Tuatha De Danann were a fair people, wise and learned in many arts. At a time, they met to elect who might be their king, and the two rivals for the throne were Lir and Bodb Derg, the son of the Dagda. The Tuatha De said that Bodb should be their king. This pleased Lir not at all, and he left the assembly without pledging fealty to Bodb Derg. The followers of the new king urged him to go after Lir, to assail his homestead, burn his house, and kill his people, but Bodb Derg refused, saying, "He will defend his home, and too many will die in the attempt. Besides, I am still king whether he gives me his fealty or not."

Now, Lir had a wife whom he loved very much. One day she fell ill. She was sick for three nights, and at the end of that time she died. Lir was stricken with grief, and he went about in mourning for a long time.

Word came to Bodb Derg of the loss of Lir. He took counsel with his nobles, and they all agreed that it would be well to try to help Lir. "For I have three foster daughters who are now of an age to marry," said Bodb, "and perhaps one of them would make a good wife for Lir."

And so messengers were sent to Lir, inviting him to the court of Bodb. The messengers said that if Lir were to offer fealty to Bodb, he might join his house to that of the Dagda by marrying one of the Bodb's foster daughters. Lir took thought on this and decided to accept. He gathered his nobles about him, and they went in fifty chariots to the court of Bodb Derg, where they were made very welcome.

At the feast, Bodb's foster daughters were seated on a bench with

their foster mother, the wife of Bodb and queen of the Tuatha De. Bodb presented them to Lir, and their names were Aobh, Aoife, and Ailbhe. Bodb said to Lir, "You may choose which of my foster daughters you wish to have as your wife."

Lir replied, "I do not know which to choose, but I think it best to take the noblest of them, and this will be the eldest."

"Aobh is eldest," said Bodb, "and she shall be your wife this night if you desire it."

"It is my wish," said Lir, and so he and Aobh were wed that night.

And so Lir stayed at the court of Bodb Derg for a fortnight and then returned to his own home, where he made a great feast among his own people to celebrate his wedding to Aobh.

Soon enough, Aobh found herself with child, and when her time came she was delivered of twins. A daughter and a son she had, and they were named Fionnula and Aodh. Not long after that she became with child again and had two more children, boys named Fiachra and Conn, and in giving birth to them Aobh died. This caused Lir a grief so great that he might have died of it, had he not had four little ones to look after.

When the news of Aobh's death came to the court of Bodb Derg, everyone there went into mourning, for Aobh was a beautiful woman and much loved. Bodb Derg sorrowed for Lir, and once again took counsel with his nobles. They decided to invite him to court again and to give him Aobh's sister, Aoife, to be his wife. Messengers were sent to Lir with the offer from the king, and Lir said that he would gladly accept once his mourning was completed. When this was done, Lir went to the court of Bodb Derg, and there he took to wife Aoife.

Aoife and Lir lived together happily as man and wife for several years. Aoife never had any children of her own, but she doted on her stepchildren, and they loved her well. Indeed, everyone loved Aobh's children, for they were comely and a great delight. Their grandfather, the king, frequently visited Lir's household to be with them and also took them back to his court to stay from time to time, and all of Bodb Derg's court were entranced with them. And Lir especially loved his children and cared for them generously.

Aoife saw how the children captured the hearts of all who met them, and how well Lir loved them, and a worm of jealousy began to eat its way into her heart. Soon she had nothing but contempt for the children, which she took pains to hide by pretending to be ill. She lay ill for an entire year, all the while devising a wicked plan to be rid of them. And when the year was up, she announced that her illness had passed and that she wished to make a journey with the

children. She called for a chariot to be harnessed, that she might take them to visit her foster father, the king.

Fionnula refused to get into the chariot saying, "I do not know where you mean to take us, but I know it is not to our grandfather's house. I had a dream last night, and I think you do not mean us well."

"My dear child," said Aoife, "how can that be? I wish nothing but the best for yourself and your brothers. We are going to visit Bodb Derg, as we often have done. Take no account of foolish dreams."

In the end, Fionnula could not resist Aoife and got into the chariot with her and her brothers. They drove on for a time, until they came to Loch Dairbhreach, the Lake of the Oaks. It was a fine summer's day, and very warm, so Aoife told the children to go into the lake and bathe to refresh themselves. The children removed their clothing, and when they had gone into the water Aoife struck them with her druid's wand, saying:

Luck be taken from you all

Children no more shall you be

In the shape of birds shall you go

And mourning cries fill the home of your father.

At this, the children were changed into four beautiful, white swans. But for all Aoife was able to change their shapes, she could not take from them the power of human speech. Fionnula reproached Aoife, saying, "Why have you done this to us? Surely we have never done any wrong to you deserving of such punishment. Know this, witch: we will seek help wherever it might be found, and soon enough you will have what you deserve for this deed. But until the day comes when you are held to account, at least have mercy enough to put bounds on our time under this enchantment."

Aoife was angered by Fionnula's defiance, and said, "It were better had you not asked for that favor, for now I say to you that your own forms you will not find until the Lord of the North shall wed the Lady of the South, and until you have spent three hundred years on Loch Dairbhreach, and three hundred years on Sruth na Maoile between Ireland and Alba, and three hundred years between Irrus Domnann and Inis Gluaire."

But then Aoife looked upon the swan-children, her heart softened towards them in their plight, although she did not repent. She said, "Those shall be the bounds, but this I grant: that you shall always keep human speech, and that you shall always sing with the voices of the Sidhe, and the music of your song shall be the most beautiful in all the world and shall put mortal men to sweet sleep. And human thought also shall you keep, and the nobility of your spirits, that

your hardship may be somewhat the less. "

Then Aoife mounted her chariot and continued on to the court of Bodb Derg, leaving the swan-children lamenting behind her on the lake. When she reached her foster father's home, he asked her what had become of his grandchildren.

"I did not bring them," said Aoife, "for you no longer have the trust of Lir. He fears the love you bear for them and thinks that you will keep them here forever."

Bodb Derg was puzzled by this, for although the children were most dear to him he had never had any thought of taking them from their father, nor had he given Lir any cause to think that he might. Bodb therefore sent messengers to the home of Lir, on the pretext of asking after his children, saying that Aoife had told Bodb that Lir was keeping them back from him. By this did Lir understand the illness of Aoife, and that she had destroyed his children.

Lir called for horses to be saddled, and taking a band of picked men he set out the way Aoife had gone. When they came near the shores of Loch Dairbhreach, the swan-children heard the hoof beats and gathered on the shore near the road. They called out to the men with their own human voices, and Lir heard them. He and his companions halted, and Lir said to the swans, "Who are you, that you can speak and I can understand?"

"We are your own dear children," said Fionnula. "The wicked Aoife has enchanted us into the shape of swans."

Lir said, "How may I reverse this magic and give you back your own shapes?"

"There is no way that I know of," said Fionnula, "for she has put the enchantment on us for the space of nine-hundred years."

Then Lir and his companions cried out with grief, and they lamented there on the shores of the lake. When they were done with their weeping, Lir said, "Since you still have the power of speech and of human reason, will you not return home with us? For even in swan-shape you are still my own dear children, and I would have you with me."

"We may not leave Loch Dairbhreach," said Fionnula, "for that also is part of the enchantment. But rest you here tonight, and we shall sing for you a sweet song that will take from you your sorrows for a while."

And so this was done, that Lir and his companions made camp there for the night, and the children sang them to sleep with their sweet voices.

In the morning, Lir made ready to leave, but his heart was heavy that he could not take his children with him. He bade them a tearful

farewell and then rode with his companions to the court of Bodb Derg. There Lir was given a fine welcome, but he gave no hint of what he had found at the lake until Bodb asked him where the children were, and Aoife was standing with him at the time .

"For that you shall have to ask your foster daughter, Aoife," said Lir, "for she has turned them into swans and bound them to the shores of Loch Dairbhreach."

At first Bodb would not believe Lir's tale, but finally he turned to Aoife and said, "Is this true?"

And she had to admit that it was. Bodb said to Aoife, "Which shape is the most abhorrent to you, were you put into it?"

Aoife said, "That of a demon of the air."

So Bodb took his own druid's wand and turned Aoife into a demon of the air. She flew three times around Bodb Derg's hall and then out an open window. She was never seen again in the shape of a woman, and for all anyone knows she flies about as a demon of the air still.

Then Bodb Derg summoned his retinue, and they went with Lir and his companions to live on the shore of Loch Dairbhreach where they might see the swan-children and listen to their song. After a time, more of the Tuatha De Danann came and made their homes there, as did the people of the Sons of Mil, for listening to the children's music was very sweet, and conversing with them was like speaking with human beings, but for them having the shape of swans. And so three hundred years passed at Loch Dairbhreach.

At the end of that three hundred years, Fionnula and her brothers went before their father and Bodb Derg and said, "Tomorrow we must fly away from here and go to Sruth na Maoile, for thus is the course of our enchantment."

Lir and Bodb Derg were greatly grieved by this and wept many tears, and the children sorrowed as well, for they did not wish to leave their father and grandfather behind. Finally they could tarry no longer. The swan-children spread their wings and took flight, and they did not stop until they arrived at Sruth na Maoile. And there the suffering of the children increased tenfold, for they were bound to stay on the waters of the cold, deep sea.

One evening as the sun was setting, Fionnula looked at the sky and saw that a storm was coming. She was afraid, for she could see that the storm was a strong one and likely she and her brothers would be lost to one another forever before it was over. She therefore said to them, "If the storm drives us apart, go when you can to Carraig na Ron, the Rock of the Seals. That is a place we all know, and we can meet there should the waves and wind divide us."

The boys agreed this was a wise plan. That night, the storm came upon them with waves as tall as houses and a rushing wind that howled and raged above the waters. As Fionnula had foreseen, she and her brothers were driven apart. When morning came, Fionnula struggled her way to Carraig na Ron, where she perched atop the rock and looked this way and that for sign of her brothers. Soon enough, they came to the rock themselves, all of them trembling and bedraggled from the ragings of the wind and sea. So Fionnula took Fiachra and Conn each under her wings, and Aodh under the feathers of her breast, and soon they were all dry and warm together

.

And there they stayed, on the rock in the middle of the sea, until one night a deep frost came, with snow in it, and in the morning the swan-children found that the ice and frost had bound their feet to the rock and part of their wing feathers with them. With great effort they pried themselves loose, but the skin of their feet was left behind on the rock, as well as many of their feathers, and they were in great pain from their wounds. Slowly the swan-children made flight to shore, where they stayed during the day so that their hurts might be healed, but every night they returned to the waters of the strait, as they were bound by their stepmother's curse to do. And so a hundred years and more passed for them in this wise, in the daytime sometimes standing on Carraig na Ron, sometimes coming to the shores of Ireland or of Alba, but always spending the night on the tossing waves of the Sruth na Maoile.

One day the swan-children made their way to the mouth of the River Bann, and they saw coming towards them a company of horsemen. The men were warriors all, clad in bright cloaks with jeweled clasps and girt with swords, all of them astride horses as white as the swans' own feathers. The children waited until the horsemen were close enough, and then called out to them, for they thought that perhaps the riders were of the Tuatha De and so could give them news of their father and grandfather.

Upon hearing the voices of the swan-children, the men reined in their horses. Two of them dismounted and went over to where the swans were gathered.

"Greetings," they said. "Strange it is to hear swans speaking with our language, and we would know who you are."

"We are the Children of Lir," said Fionnula. "It is I, Fionnula, and my brothers Aodh and Fiachra and Conn, who were enchanted into the shape of swans by our stepmother, Aoife. Tell us now who you are, and who your people might be, for we hope you might have news for us of our father and grandfather."

"I am Aodh," said the first man, "and this is my brother, Fergus. We are the sons of Bodb Derg. We rejoice to have found you, for none has known what became of you after you left Loch Dairbhreach. We have sought for you for a long time."

"Glad we are as well," said Fionnula. "Tell us, if you will, how do our father and grandfather?"

"They are both well and residing in your father's house together," said Aodh Aithfhiosach, "and they are happy enough, save that they have wished sorely for news of you."

Then Fionnula and her brothers told Aodh and Fergus all they had suffered in their time on Sruth na Maoile, and it was grief indeed to the sons of Bodb Derg to hear this tale. They promised the swan-children to tell Lir and Bodb Derg their whole story, and to bring them their greetings. Lir and Bodb Derg rejoiced to hear that the children were yet living, although they had great sorrow for their sufferings, and again they wished heartily that there was something they could do to break the enchantment and bring the children home, but there was nothing to be done.

And so the rest of the three hundred years on Sruth na Maoile passed, until it came time for the swan-children to go to Irrus Domnann and Inis Gluaire. There they went in their swan-shapes, and there passed the next three hundred years, where they fared but a little better than they had on Sruth na Maoile.

At the end of that three hundred years, the swan-children were no longer bound to Irrus Domnann and Inis Gluaire, so they took flight for their father's home at Sidhe Fionnachaidh. All the way there the hearts of Fionnula and her brothers were glad and hopeful, for they heartily wished to see Lir again, and also Bodb Derg, and to be among their own people. But when they arrived, they knew not what to do, for Sidhe Fionnachaidh was abandoned and empty. The fields were overgrown with briars. The roofless house was abandoned to the wind and rain and the stones of the walls tumbling down into the turf. Fionnula and her brothers lamented together at the sight and sang a song so full of sorrow that had even the most hardened warrior heard it he would have died of a broken heart from the very pain of it. And so the swan-children passed that night in the ruins of their father's house, and in the morning returned to Inis Gluaire.

The swan-children stayed at times in Inis Gluaire, and at times flew to other places, but always they were in their swan-forms, and always they lamented the loss of their father and grandfather and of their people, the Tuatha De Danann. And in this wise they lived until after the coming of the Blessed St. Patrick to Ireland and St.

Mochaomhog had built his church at Inis Gluaire.

One night, when they were at Inis Gluaire, they heard the ringing of a bell.

"What is that sound?" said Fiachra.

"That is the bell of Mochaomhog," said Fionnula. "Come, let us go and seek out that priest, for perhaps he has a way of ending our curse."

Mochaomhog's bell rang out until the end of Matins, and when it was done the swan-children began to sing the song of the Sidhe. Mochaomhog in his church heard their song and prayed to God that he might know whence it came. In a dream, he saw the swan-children gliding on the lake nearby, and so in the morning he went there to seek them. When he arrived at the lake, he saw the swan-children there, as they had been in his dream.

"Are you the Children of Lir?" said Mochaomhog, and the swan-children told him they were.

"Come with me," said the priest, "and be in my care, for it is given to me to see that all be made well for you."

The swan-children went with him then back to his church, and they lived with him. Every day, Mochaomhog said Holy Mass, which the swan-children reverently attended. Mochaomhog also had silver collars fashioned for them, with a chain between each pair of collars. Fionnula was linked with Aodh, her twin, and Fiachra and Conn were linked likewise. The swan-children lived in peace and great contentment with Mochaomhog, and he cared for them well.

Now, at that time there was a king in Connacht, and his name was Lairgnen and his wife was named Deoch. And their marriage was the fulfillment of Aoife's condition that the Lord of the North be wed to the Lady of the South. Word that the Children of Lir were living at Mochaomhog's church came to the ears of Deoch, and she wished to have them brought to her. Lairgnen then sent messengers to Mochaomhog, asking him to send the birds to the queen, but the priest refused. This angered the king greatly, so he went to Inis Gluaire himself to take the birds from Mochaomhog, by force if need be.

But when Lairgnen demanded the swans, Mochaomhog said, "I shall not give them to you, though you be king of all the world."

At that the king rose up in anger and went to where the swan-children were hiding in the church. Lairgnen took them in his hands, thinking to carry them home to his wife, but as soon as he touched them their swan-forms fell away. Lairgnen found himself grasping the arms of a woman and three men, all white-haired and withered with great age. This frightened Lairgnen so greatly that he

ran out of the church and straight back to his home without once looking back.

Then Fionnula called out to Mochaomhog, "Come to us, quickly, for our death is upon us. Listen to my last request, and do what I ask for love of myself and my brothers. Bury us all together, with Conn at my left and Fiachra at my right, and my brother Aodh in my arms. And do you now baptize all of us in the name of your God that we might be with him in paradise."

And so all this was done. Mochaomhog baptized the four that very day. They passed soon afterwards, and were buried together in the manner Fionnula asked, with stone placed above them having their names carved into it in ogham. Mochaomhog and the people of his parish mourned the death of the swan-children, whose souls were taken into paradise after their long lives of suffering.

And that is all that is known of the Children of Lir.

The Birth of Cuchulainn

As befits a Celtic hero, Cuchulainn is born not once but three times, a mystical number that denotes Otherworldly origins. His first birth is of Otherworldly parents, his second of the god Lug, and his third of a human father. We know that the first family is of the Otherworld first because of the flock of birds that lead Conchobor and Deichtine to them, and also by the birthplace at Brugh na Boinne, home to an important series of ancient pagan tombs that were considered to be passages to the Otherworld.

Tales such as these often contain hints about ancient Irish culture, such as the practice of noble families sending their children out to foster. Taking in the child of another noble family was seen as both a right and a privilege and could confer status on the foster family.

The people of Ulster once were beset by a large flock of birds. The birds came to the plain of Emain, and wherever they came to rest on the ground they ate whatever grew there. The crops were being ruined, and the people of Ulster were angry and afraid.

Conchobor went with his nobles in nine chariots to chase after the flock and make them go away if they could. Deichtine, the sister of Conchobor, went with them, driving the chariot for her brother. Conall and Laegire and Bricriu, the finest of the warriors of Ulster, accompanied Conchobor and Deichtine as well.

Conchobor and his company chased the birds across Sliab Fuait. They chased them across Edmonn and Breg Plain. Nine score birds there were, flying always before them, singing a graceful song. As the chariots drew closer, the warriors could see that the birds wore silver collars, and that pairs of the birds were linked together with

chains of silver. The day wore on, and Conchobor and his company could come no closer to them. As the sun set, they watched three of the birds separate from the flock and fly away.

The men of Ulster chased the birds as far as Brugh na Boinne, but then night fell and they had to stop. Conchobor told his company to loose the horses from their traces, and to look for someplace they might shelter for the night. While the others looked after the horses, Conall and Bricriu went to find shelter. They found a house standing by itself in a lonely place. In the house was a man and his wife, and the wife was with child. They told Conall and Bricriu that their company would be made most welcome.

Conall and Bricriu returned and told Conchobor what they had found, and soon the whole company was lodged in the tiny house that stood alone on the plain. There was food and drink in plenty, and the Ulstermen enjoyed themselves well. While they were at table, the man came to Conchobor and said, "Please help us. My wife is in her pains."

Deichtine left the company and went to help the woman. Soon the woman was delivered of a fine baby boy. There was also a mare at the house, who gave birth to two foals. This happened exactly when the woman gave birth to her son. Deichtine nursed the boy, and the warriors gave him the foals as a gift.

When all this was done, the company lay down to sleep. But when morning came, they awoke to find that the house had vanished, along with the man and the woman and the mare. In the folds of Conchobor's cloak lay the baby, and with their own horses stood the two foals. The men looked about and found that the flock of birds also had vanished. At that, they harnessed their horses and returned to Emain, where Deichtine tended the baby as though he were her own. The baby grew well under Deichtine's care, but one day he took sick and died, and Deichtine's grief was very great .

One time after this, Deichtine became thirsty. She took a drink of water but did not notice that a small creature was in the cup. She swallowed the creature along with the water. That night, Deichtine had a dream. In the dream, a man came to her. He was handsome and well-built, obviously a mighty warrior. The man said to her, "I it was who brought you and your company to Brugh na Boinne. My son it was that you cared for as your own. My name is Lug mac Ethnenn. I give you another son this night, and you shall name him Setanta. You shall raise him with the foals who were also born at Brugh na Boinne."

Soon afterwards, Deichtine found herself with child. But she was not wed, so the people of Ulster whispered among themselves that

maybe Conchobor had lain with his own sister one night, when he was drunk. This brought shame on Conchobor, so he wed her to Sualdam mac Roich.

On her wedding night, Deichtine did not want to lie with her husband while she was with child. She fell ill, and she vomited. When she vomited, the creature she had swallowed came out of her body. Having thus purified herself, she went to her new husband and lay with him. She was made with child by him, and when her time came, she bore a son. She named the boy Setanta.

When Deichtine's son was born, the nobles of Conchobor's court argued about who was to take him in to foster. Each of them boasted about his wealth and skills, and about how he would be the best choice to raise the boy. Then Conchobor said, "Let us not argue in this fashion. My sister Finnchaem will care for the boy until we return to Emain, and there we will ask judgement of Morann, who is wise and judges fairly."

It was done as Conchobor said. They all returned to Emain, and Finnchaem cared for Setanta. They went to Morann and told him the issue that needed to be decided. Morann said, "Conchobor should be his foster father because he is Setanta's kinsman. The rest of you also shall foster him and teach him the things you know. This boy will be a hero and the defender of Ulster, and all of you shall help him reach his destiny."

The men of Ulster thought this a very fair judgement, so Setanta was given first to Finnchaem and Amergin in their house at Imrith Fort on the Plain of Murtheimne until such time as he was old enough to learn what the others had to teach.

How Cuchulainn Got His Name

Like many heroes, Cuchulainn—whose boyhood name was Setanta, as we have seen—is possessed of prodigious strength and skill from an early age. In this story, we learn how he got the name Cuchulainn, which means "Hound of Culann." The translation of the Irish word cu as "hound" is important because it refers to a particular kind of dog, a noble animal and a hunter—or, as in this tale, a fierce watchdog—while the word gadhar refers to a more ordinary dog.

Hurling, which is played by Cuchulainn and Conchobor's boy-troop, is an ancient Irish sport that is still played today. Players use "hurleys," which are something like hockey sticks with rounded heads, to hit or carry a small ball. Hands and feet also can be used to move the ball. Points are scored by hitting the ball over the opponent's goalposts or into a net that is guarded by the opponent's goalkeeper.

Fidchell, the game played by Conchobor in this tale, is likewise very

ancient. Sometimes the word fidchell is translated as "chess," but while we know that fidchell was some kind of board game played by two opponents having an equal number of pieces, no boards, pieces, or rules for fidchell have survived, so it is unclear exactly how closely it might have matched the game of chess as we know it today.

Thrice-born Setanta grew to boyhood in a great house on the plain of Muirthemne. One day, when Setanta was five years old, tales of the boy-troop of Emain Macha came to his ears. He heard that King Conchobor liked to divide his day into three parts: one part was for watching the boy-troop at their games, of which hurling was chiefest; one was for playing *fidchell* ; and the third was for eating and drinking and listening to the music of minstrels until he felt sleepy and retired to his chamber.

Setanta went to his mother and said, "Mother, I should like to go to Emain Macha. I should like to meet the boy-troop of Conchobor and see whether I can best them at their sports."

"Oh, Setanta," said his mother, "you should not go. You are too young, and there is no warrior to go with you to ensure your safety."

"I do not need a warrior to protect me," said Setanta. "And I will not wait. I mean to go now, if you would but tell me the way."

Setanta's mother reluctantly agreed, and so told him how to get to Emain Macha. The next day, Setanta set out for the court of Conchobor. He took with him his shield, his brass hurley, his silver ball, his javelin, and his toy spear, and with these things he amused himself on his long journey. First he used the hurley to hit the ball, driving it a long distance in front of him. Then he threw the hurley the same distance in the same direction, and then the javelin likewise, and then the spear. This done, he would run after all of these and pick up the ball, the hurley, and the javelin, and then catch the spear before it hit the ground.

Soon enough, Setanta arrived at Emain Macha. There he found Conchobor's boy-troop at their sport. Three times fifty boys there were, all playing on a green field. Some were playing hurley, while others were learning warrior's craft with Conchobor's son, Follamain. Without speaking a word to any of them, Setanta dove into the hurley game. He caught the ball between his knees and held it there, and none of the boys could touch it. Holding the ball this way, he went down the field and then put the ball over the post for a goal. The boy-troop watched this in amazement .

Follamain saw it also and cried out, "Who is this upstart who enters your game without first getting your guarantee of protection, as is your custom? All of you now, fall upon him and kill him, for he has no right to be here."

The boy-troop immediately took their hurleys and threw them at Setanta's head, but he parried each and every one of them with his own hurley. Then the boys pelted Setanta with balls, but he kept these off with his hands and arms. When the boys flung their little spears at him, Setanta caught every spear with his shield, and so was unharmed. Then Setanta waded in among the boys and laid low fifty of them, and they the best and strongest and most skilled of the whole troop.

As Conchobor sat playing *fidchell* with Fergus, five of the boys went speeding past, trying to escape Setanta's wrath, and Setanta himself close on their heels. Conchobor called out to Setanta.

"Stop, there!" he said. "What game is this that you play with my boy-troop? Why do you use them so ill?"

"That question you might ask of them as well," said Setanta, "for here I am come from a distant land, and no guest's welcome to meet me."

"I see," said Conchobor. "Who are you, and who are your parents?"

"I am Setanta, son of Sualdam and your sister, Deichtine, and I did not expect to be treated as an enemy here."

"Did you not know that it is the custom of my boy-troop that all outsiders must beg their protection before joining them at their sport?" said Conchobor.

"I did not," said Setanta, "otherwise this I would have done from the first."

Conchobor therefore went to the boy-troop and said, "You shall now pledge to this lad your protection," and the troop agreed that they would do so.

Then Conchobor said to Setanta, "What are you going to do now?"

"I shall offer the boy-troop my protection."

"Promise it to me, then," said Conchobor. "Swear it now."

"I do swear," said Setanta.

Then the boys returned to their play, and those that Setanta had knocked down were helped up and given care for their hurts.

One day, when Setanta was six years old, Conchobor set out with some of his choicest warriors and Cathbad the druid to attend a feast at the home of Culann the Smith. According to his custom, Conchobor first went to the playing-field to see what the boys were doing and ask their blessing upon his journey. When he arrived, he watched the boys playing one game after another, the entire troop against Setanta, and in each game Setanta defeated the lot of them with ease. Conchobor was amazed by this, and invited Setanta to go to the feast with him.

"I thank you," said Setanta, "but first I must finish my sport with the boy-troop. I will meet you there later."

Conchobor went ahead to the feast with his warriors. When they arrived, Culann greeted them well and said, "Is this all the company? I ask this because I have a great hound that guards my livestock. He is cunning and vicious, and so strong that it takes three men holding his three chains to keep him back when he is roused. I am going to let him go after the gate is closed and you and your company are inside."

"There are no others following after," said Conchobor, for he had forgotten that Setanta would be joining them when he was done with his play.

The company sat down to the feast Culann had made, and they were enjoying themselves well when they heard the baying of the hound outside. Then Conchobor blanched, for he remembered that Setanta was to follow them, and the hound was loose in the field. Conchobor ran to the window at the sound of the hound's baying, as did Culann and the rest of the company. With great dismay they watched little Setanta making his way across the field, amusing himself with his hurley and ball by striking the ball and then running to catch it before it hit the ground, and the great hound racing towards him with such speed that not even the fastest chariot could have caught him before he reached the lad.

The hound made for Setanta, its maw wide open to swallow him at one gulp. But Setanta did not even flinch. Instead, he took his hurley and struck the ball mightily at the hound. He hit the ball with such force that it went straight down the hound's gullet and passed all the way through its body without stopping. Then Setanta grabbed the hound by its hind legs and dashed its back against a tree so hard that its limbs were forced right out of their sockets.

Culann, Conchobor, and the warriors came running out to see what had become of Setanta, and found the boy standing there next to the remains of the hound. Culann lamented when he saw that the hound was dead. "O that I had never given this feast!" he said. "That hound was the best that ever was, and like part of my family. He guarded my household and my property, and never shall his like be seen again!"

"Do not grieve," said Setanta, "for I myself will rear a pup to take his place, and he will do the same duty and more for you. And until that pup is ready, I myself will be your hound, guarding your household and your property, and all Murtheimne Plain besides."

Culann accepted this as payment of Setanta's debt, and Conchobor also said that it was a fair offer. Then Cathbad the druid said, "Your

name from henceforth shall be Cuchulainn, the Hound of Culann."
Setanta pronounced himself well pleased with this, and he used that name to the end of his days.

PART II

Wales

Pwyll, Prince of Dyfed

This story, from the first branch of the Welsh Mabinogion, has many hallmarks of Celtic myth, especially in the fluid boundaries between the human world and the Otherworld. The first indication that the human Pwyll has stepped over that boundary is the color of the strange hunting pack: the hounds are white with red ears, a clear sign that they belong to an Otherworldly huntsman. The second half of the story also partakes of ancient Celtic ideas about the Otherworld: a perch on a perilous hill that allows one to see things that might not otherwise be seen; a mysterious horse and rider who cannot be chased down; and a miraculous child who shows precocious growth and prodigious strength.

Readers of Lloyd Alexander's Chronicles of Prydain will recognize this story as the source of the names Arawn and Annuvín (spelled Annwfn in the Welsh original). In Alexander's telling, Arawn is an evil dark lord and Annuvín his fearsome realm. In this tale, however, Arawn is not drawn as a villain, and while the Annwfn of the Mabinogion definitely is in the Otherworld, it is not a dark or forbidding place at all. Alexander likewise altered the characters of Pwyll and Pryderi to suit his own stories which, although drawing on the Mabinogion, are not retellings of those ancient tales.

Once there was a Prince of Dyfed, and his name was Pwyll. Pwyll liked nothing better than to go hunting, and so one morning he and his companions mounted their horses and took their hounds out into the countryside, where they hoped to catch a fine stag. They had not been hunting long when Pwyll and his hounds became separated from his friends. As Pwyll looked about trying to find where the others had gone, he heard the cry of hounds, but it was not the cry of his own pack. Pwyll rode into a clearing, where he saw the other pack of hounds chasing a stag.

Pwyll had never seen hounds like these before. Their coats were white as snow, but their ears were red as blood. Before Pwyll could call his own hounds to him, the other pack attacked the stag and brought it down. Pwyll chased away the strange dogs and allowed his own pack to eat of the carcass.

While Pwyll's dogs were eating, a man rode up on a dapple-grey horse. He carried a hunting horn on a fine chain, and his clothes were all of a soft grey color. The rider said, "Sir, I recognize you, but I will not greet you."

Pwyll said, "Perhaps you are of a rank that does not require you to

greet me."

"No," said the rider, "it is not rank that prevents me, but your own grave discourtesy."

"What discourtesy have I done?" said Pwyll.

"Why, nothing more than chasing away the pack that brought down the stag, only to feed your own hounds upon it," said the rider. "However, I do not mean to take revenge on you for it. Rather I will sound your shame throughout the whole land, even to the value of one hundred stags."

Pwyll said, "If I have done discourtesy to you, then I shall make it right. This I shall do according to your station, but first I must know your name and where is your country."

"In my country, I am a king," said the rider.

"My lord, I greet you and wish you good day," said Pwyll. "What is the name of your country?"

"I come from Annwfn," said the rider, "and my name is Arawn, king of Annwfn."

"My lord," said Pwyll, "how shall I make it right between us?"

"I shall tell you," said the rider. "There is another king in Annwfn, and his name is Hafgan. He continually fights with me. I wish him to harry me no more. If you want to earn my friendship, you must rid me of him."

"That I will gladly do," said Pwyll, "if you tell me how to go about it."

Arawn said, "You will come to my palace in Annwfn, and for the space of a year you shall wear my face and form so that none of my courtiers will be able to tell the difference between us. You shall share a bed with my own wife, and neither shall she know that you are not me. This you shall do for the space of one year, and at the end of that time we will meet again in this place."

"I do not understand how this will put an end to your enemy," said Pwyll. "Also I do not know this Hafgan; how will I find him so that I may rid you of him?"

"I have an agreement to meet him at the ford a year from tonight. If you go there in my place, in my shape, you shall give him one blow. He will die of it. But you must not give him more than one, no matter how much he asks you to do so. Because every other time I have faced him, it did not matter how many times I struck him, he was always as strong as before."

"I shall do as you ask," said Pwyll, "but what will become of my own lands while I am gone? "

"I shall assume your form in the same way you shall assume mine,

and none in your lands will know the difference," said Arawn.

"I accept these terms gladly," said Pwyll. "You have but to show me the way to your court."

Arawn then told him the way to his palace. He told Pwyll to go straight to the court, and to behave as though he belonged there, for none of the people would be able to tell he was not Arawn.

When Pwyll arrived, he saw that Arawn's court was indeed a fine place. The palace was made of well-hewn stone, and the halls and chambers were lined with tapestries and carved wood. Pwyll was greeted warmly by many servants, who helped him change his clothes to ready him for the banquet. Then Pwyll went into the hall, and marveled at the many warriors gathered there, each one of them obviously a champion.

Pwyll took his seat at table, with the queen on his right and a man he supposed was an earl on his left. The queen was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and after but a little speech with her Pwyll saw that she was the most gracious as well. The evening passed with much enjoyment, and soon it was time for bed. The queen and Pwyll went up to their chamber together, and when they climbed into bed Pwyll turned his back to her and said not another word until the morning, and in this wise they slept together for the space of a year.

For the whole of that year, Pwyll spent his time happily in hunting and feasting with his new companions, until it came time for him to go to the ford for the meeting he had promised to attend. He went to the ford accompanied by a band of his noblemen. They arrived to find Hafgan there before them, with his own retinue of picked warriors, and just as it was at the court of Annwfn, none could tell that Pwyll was not Arawn.

One of Arawn's noblemen came forward and said, "This is a dispute between kings, over lands and domains. The dispute is between them and them alone. No one is to interfere in their fight."

Then Hafgan and Pwyll took up their swords and shields. They mounted their chargers and advanced into the ford. At the very first clash of arms, Pwyll clove Hafgan's shield in two with a blow so mighty it shattered Hafgan's armor and sent him reeling back over his horse's crupper and into the river, and Hafgan knew that he had received his death-blow.

Hafgan got to his knees and said, "My lord, by what right do you deal me a death-blow? I claimed nothing from you: you started this dispute to take lands from me. I do not know why you think I must die here in the ford, but since you have started down that path you may as well finish it. Kill me now!"

"My lord," said Pwyll, "I may yet regret what I have done to you. But I will not kill you. You must find someone else to do that deed."

Hafgan turned to his nobles and said, "Take me away from here. I soon shall die. I will not be your king any longer. "

Pwyll said to Hafgan's nobles, "I give you time to take counsel to see which of you must now owe fealty to me."

Hafgan's nobles replied that all of them now were vassals of Arawn, and that Arawn was now the sole king in Annwfn. Pwyll then received their fealty and set about the work of ordering the realm of Annwfn.

After this was done, Pwyll set out for the place where he was to meet Arawn, and he found Arawn there before him. The two men greeted each other well.

Arawn said, "May God bless you well for all you have done, for I have heard all about it."

Then Arawn returned himself to his own form, and did the same for Pwyll. Then the two men bade farewell to one another and went to their own homes.

When Arawn arrived back at his own court, he greeted everyone very warmly, for he had missed them while he was away. Everyone remarked on how friendly Arawn was being, for they did not know that he had been elsewhere. That night there was a great banquet, and when it came time to go to bed Arawn was very affectionate with his wife, and he made joyful love to her. She wondered what had happened to change his mood so much, since he had not touched her for an entire year.

She thought long about this. When Arawn woke up, he spoke to her, but she did not answer. He did this many times, but each time his wife remained silent.

"Wife," said Arawn, "why will you not speak to me?"

"It is because for a full year you have said not one word to me when we have been in this bed."

"But we have always talked together here," said Arawn.

"Husband, I tell you that for the space of a whole year you have said not one word to me when we have been together in bed, neither have you touched me nor so much as looked at me."

Arawn thought how steadfast and faithful Pwyll had been to him, and was grateful. Then he turned to his wife and said, "My lady, I do not blame you for your anger. But I must tell you that for the space of that year it was not I who shared this bed with you." And then he told her the whole story, and she also marveled at how faithful Pwyll had been.

Now, as Arawn was enjoying his homecoming, Pwyll also returned to his own realm. He asked his nobles how well they thought he had ruled them for the past year, and to a man they agreed they had never seen the realm so well ordered. Then Pwyll told them the whole story, saying that they owed thanks to Arawn for his diligence. The nobles agreed that Arawn had proved a stout friend to Pwyll. But then they said, "Surely you will continue to rule in the same wise as Arawn had done?" And Pwyll swore that he would do so .

Pwyll and Arawn continued to be friends. They paid visits to each other's courts and went hunting together, and from time to time would exchange gifts of hounds or horses or weapons, or of other things they found that they thought might make a fine present for the other to enjoy. And because Pwyll had ruled so faithfully in Arawn's stead, he was no longer styled Prince of Dyfed, but rather Pwyll Pen Annwfn.

There came a time when Pwyll went to visit his court at Arberth. The court held a great banquet in his honor, and after he had eaten and drunk Pwyll went to stretch his legs. He headed for a mound that was situated near the court, and this place was called Gorsedd Arberth. One of his nobles saw which way he was going and said, "My lord, I do not counsel you to walk upon that mound, for it is said that if a nobleman ascends it he will not come down again save he has been wounded or else seen some marvel."

"I do not fear being wounded," said Pwyll, "for surely I am safe here among a retinue of so many champions, and the sight of a marvel would be most welcome."

Pwyll ascended the mound, and some of his noblemen came with him. When they got to the top, they sat down. Soon enough, they saw a maiden approaching. She was dressed in the finest silk embroidered with golden thread, and she was riding a milk-white horse.

"Does anyone recognize that woman?" said Pwyll.

The nobles all said that they did not know her.

"Someone must go and find out who she is," said Pwyll.

One of the nobles ran down the hill, but the woman had already ridden past, and no matter how fast the man ran, he could not catch up with her. The noble returned to Pwyll and said, "My lord, no one will be able to catch her on foot."

"Go and get the fastest horse in the stable," said Pwyll. "Follow her, and find out who she is."

The nobleman did as Pwyll bid him. He took the fastest horse in the stable and galloped after the woman. The woman's horse seemed to

be going at an easy pace, but no matter how fast the nobleman rode, he could come no closer to her than when he first espied her on the road. Soon his horse tired, and he had to turn back. He went to Pwyll and told him what had happened.

"I see," said Pwyll. "There is something magical afoot here. We can do no more for now."

Then he and his nobles returned to the court, where they spent the rest of their day.

The next day there was another banquet. Pwyll again set out for the mound after he had eaten and drunk, but this time he took a fast horse with him, and a servant to ride it. They had barely reached the top of the mound when they saw the lady on the white horse approaching on the highway, just as had happened the previous day .

Pwyll told the servant, "Quick! Mount, and go after her. Find out who she is and where she lives."

By the time the lad was mounted and on the highway, the lady had already passed. The servant spurred his horse to catch up with her, but no matter how fast he galloped he could not draw any closer, even though the lady's mount seemed to be going at an easy pace. The servant tried slowing his horse, to see whether he might be able to catch her if he matched her pace, but neither was this of any use. He tried once more to ride hard after her, but he could not catch her, and she never varied her speed. The servant returned to the court and told Pwyll what had happened. Pwyll realized that it was of no use to try to chase her, although he was convinced that she had a message to deliver if only someone were able to speak with her.

That evening and the next day passed in the same fashion as the ones before, and at the end of the day's feast Pwyll returned to the mound with a company of his nobles. But this time he brought his own horse and wore his own spurs. Soon enough, they saw the lady approaching on her horse. Pwyll mounted as she rode past. He galloped after her, thinking that surely he would be able to catch her, for no horse in the land could match his own for fire and speed. But it was no different for him than for any of the others who had tried: however hard he rode she always stayed the same distance away, going at the same easy pace.

Finally Pwyll called out, "My lady! For the sake of your own beloved, I beg that you wait for me."

"That I will do gladly," said the woman, "but your horse might have preferred it if you had asked me earlier."

The lady waited for Pwyll, and as he drew near she pulled away the

veil that had been covering her face.

"My lady," said Pwyll, "where are you from, and where is it that you are going?"

"I go where I will, on business of my own," she said. "And I am very glad to speak with you."

"I am grateful also that you will speak with me," said Pwyll, and he saw that she was more beautiful than any woman he had ever seen before.

"My lady," said Pwyll, "may I know what business you are on?"

"Certainly," she replied. "My business is to speak with you."

"Surely that is the best business you could undertake," said Pwyll. "If it please you, may I know your name?"

"I am Rhiannon, daughter of Hyfaidd Hen. My father wishes me to marry a man of his choosing. But I do not wish that marriage, because of the love I bear for you. I will not marry another, unless you say you do not want me. But that is why I have ridden by the mound these past days: to have your answer whether we shall wed or not. "

Pwyll said, "I swear solemnly that if I were given all the women in the world to choose from, I would choose only you to be my bride."

"I am well pleased," said Rhiannon. "You must arrange to meet with me, then, before I am wed to another."

"I shall meet with you at the time and place that you choose," said Pwyll.

"Very well," said Rhiannon. "Meet me at the court of Hyfaidd, a year from tonight. I shall have a feast prepared for you when you come."

Pwyll agreed to Rhiannon's plan. Then they took their leave of each other, and Pwyll returned to the mound where he found his nobles still waiting for him. They asked him many times what had happened while he was away, but he would not answer.

When the time came for his meeting with Rhiannon, Pwyll called to himself a retinue of ninety-nine nobles. They went to the court of Hyfaidd where they were made most welcome. At the banquet, Pwyll sat with Hyfaidd to one side of him and Rhiannon to the other, and the rest of the company sat according to their stations. They ate and drank and enjoyed themselves greatly, and while they were enjoying themselves a tall youth with auburn hair strode into the hall. He walked up to Pwyll and greeted him well.

"You are most welcome, friend," said Pwyll. "Come, take a seat, and meat and drink will be brought to you."

"I thank you, but I shall not sit," said the youth. "For I have come to ask of you a favor."

"You have my leave to ask," said Pwyll, "and whatever I may do for you, I shall do or see done."

Rhiannon turned to Pwyll in alarm. "You should not have given your word so freely!" she said.

"It is too late, my Lady," said the youth, "for his word is now given, and in the presence of witnesses."

"Make your request," said Pwyll.

"You are here tonight to wed the woman I love most," said the youth, "and I therefore ask that she become my bride, and that this feast before you tonight become my wedding feast."

At this Pwyll said nothing.

"Holding your peace avails you nothing," said Rhiannon. "Never was any man more foolhardy than you have been tonight, for this is the man my father wanted me to marry against my will."

"My lady, I beg your pardon," said Pwyll, "for I did not know who he was."

"He is Gwawl son of Clud, a nobleman with a large retinue. And now you must give me over to him, for you have pledged your word to do so. "

"My lady, I could never give you to another man," said Pwyll.

"You must. But never fear: he shall never have me if you do as I say," said Rhiannon.

"What must I do?" said Pwyll.

Then Rhiannon whispered to Pwyll her plan how she would set herself free from Gwawl. Rhiannon gave Pwyll a small bag and told him that he should come to the feast she would make for Gwawl in a year's time, but that Pwyll should disguise himself as a beggar. He should ask Gwawl to fill the bag with food and that he would leave when the bag was full. Except the bag was magical: no matter how much food was put into the bag, it would only ever be half full unless a man of the very highest quality climbed inside and stamped down the food. Surely Gwawl would want to prove his quality and would climb inside the bag. Then Pwyll could close the bag up tight with Gwawl inside it, and he would be in Pwyll's power. Once Gwawl was Pwyll's prisoner, Pwyll could summon his warriors to invade the court and subdue Gwawl's retinue.

While Rhiannon was speaking to Pwyll, Gwawl became impatient. "My lord, you have given your word, and I wait for you to make good upon it."

Pwyll said, "I will grant your request insofar as I have power to grant it."

Then Rhiannon said to Gwawl, "Me you shall have, but the feast is

not Pwyll's to give. I have already given it to him and to his retinue. Come back a year from tonight, and I shall prepare a feast for you, and we shall be wed at that time."

Gwawl agreed to these terms, and departed from the court of Hyfaidd.

At the appointed time, Rhiannon made ready a feast for Gwawl and his retinue. Pwyll also made ready. He disguised himself in ragged, dirty clothes and wore boots with holes in them. He took with him his own retinue of ninety-nine warriors, all armed and ready for battle. The warriors he hid in the forest outside the court of Hyfaidd, while he himself limped up to the gate. Pretending to be a beggar, Pwyll went to the gate of the court and was allowed in, for it was the custom there that no beggar be turned away. Pwyll went into the hall where Gwawl sat with Rhiannon on his right hand, and Hyfaidd on his left.

Gwawl saw the beggar approaching and said, "Welcome to you. What is it that you want?"

"I come to beg for food, my lord," said Pwyll, "food to fill my small bag, here."

Gwawl ordered his servants to give food to the beggar, thinking that such a small bag would be quickly filled and he would be rid of this pest. But no matter how many loaves of bread or haunches of meat the servants put into the bag, it was never full.

"What is taking so long?" said Gwawl. "Why is that bag not yet full?"

"My lord," said Pwyll, "it will only be full if a nobleman of the highest quality should step in and stamp down what is already inside."

Rhiannon said to Gwawl, "You are such a nobleman. No one else here could do that deed, I am sure of it!"

Wishing to prove himself to Rhiannon and to the court, Gwawl said, "I will gladly do this thing."

Gwawl then climbed into the bag. Quickly Pwyll shook the bag and turned it about so that Gwawl would be head over heels. Then Pwyll pulled the drawstrings tight and tied them so that Gwawl could not escape. Pwyll threw off his rags and took out his hunting horn, which he had concealed in his beggar's clothes, and blew upon it a mighty blast. The warriors he had hidden in the trees came rushing into the court at Pwyll's signal. They subdued Gwawl's retinue and took them prisoner. Once that was done, each of Pwyll's warriors went up to the bag and struck it a blow, saying "What is in here?"

From inside the bag Gwawl said, "My lord, surely it is not fitting for you to kill me this way, while I am tied up inside a bag and cannot

defend myself."

Hyfaidd Hen said, "Surely what he says is true. He is a nobleman, and this is not fitting."

"Yes, I agree," said Pwyll. "So what is to be done with him?"

"I know what should be done, if you will hear me," said Rhiannon to Pwyll. "You now have the power in this court. It is for you now to grant favors here. Have Gwawl make presents to all who are now here, and make him promise that he will seek neither claim nor vengeance against you for what has happened here this day."

"I accept those terms gladly," said Gwawl, still inside the bag.

"That is good advice, and I also accept," said Pwyll, "if guarantors may be found for Gwawl."

"I will stand surety for him," said Hyfaidd, "until his nobles can do that for him."

At that, Gwawl was let out of the bag. When the nobles who would stand surety for Gwawl had also been set free, and when they had agreed to act on Gwawl's behalf as needed, Gwawl was given permission to withdraw so that he could bathe and have his wounds dressed before he departed for his own lands.

Then Hyfaidd's hall was prepared once again for a feast, this time to celebrate the wedding of Rhiannon and Pwyll, and when the feast was done Rhiannon and Pwyll went to their chamber, and there they delighted in one another and became man and wife. The next day, Pwyll and Rhiannon arose early. Pwyll went to the court, where he heard the pleas of suppliants and musicians. He gave them all they asked, and no one went away unsatisfied .

When this was done, Pwyll went to Hyfaidd and said, "I wish to set out for Dyfed tomorrow, with your blessing."

Hyfaidd said, "This is well. Tell me when Rhiannon is to follow you."

"My lord," said Pwyll, "I wish that she should come with me when I go."

Hyfaidd agreed to this, and in the morning Pwyll and Rhiannon went to Dyfed. They stopped at Pwyll's court at Arberth, where they found a feast awaiting them. All the nobles of Dyfed were gathered there, to celebrate the marriage of Pwyll and Rhiannon. To each and every one Rhiannon gave some precious gift, according to their station. For three years after that, the nobles were content with the rule of Pwyll and his bride, but at the end of that time they became restless, for Pwyll did not yet have an heir.

The nobles came before Pwyll and said, "My lord, we counsel that you take another wife, that you may have a son. You cannot continue to rule us if you cannot produce an heir."

Pwyll replied, "I hear your words. I beg you give us another year, and if at the end of that time I have no heir, I will do as you ask."

The nobles agreed to Pwyll's request. Before the end of the year, Rhiannon found herself with child. When her time came, she was delivered of a fine baby boy. Women were set to watch over mother and child after the birth, but one by one the women fell asleep, as did Rhiannon herself. When the women awoke, they found that the baby was missing.

"What shall we do?" said one woman. "Surely we will all be put to death for this."

The others agreed that this was likely.

Then another woman said, "I know what we should do. In the mews there is a hound who has had a litter of pups. Take some of the pups, and kill them. Smear the blood all over the queen's face and hands, and put the bones in the bed with her. We all will then swear that she killed the child herself."

The women agreed that this was a good plan, and it was done. When Rhiannon awoke, she asked where her child had gone.

"Do not ask us, my lady," said the women. "You have only to look about you to see what became of him. And you have only to look at the bruises upon our arms to see how we had to fight you, and still you were able to destroy your son."

Rhiannon looked upon the women and said, "You must not tell lies about me. I cannot protect you if you do not tell me the truth."

The women swore that they were truthful. Rhiannon urged them again and again not to tell lies, but the women swore each time that they were telling the truth .

Soon enough word of the women's story came to the ears of Pwyll and his nobles. The nobles insisted that Pwyll divorce Rhiannon and take another wife. But Pwyll refused, saying, "I need divorce my wife only if she is barren, and that she is not. I have an heir. But if my wife has done wrong, then she should be punished."

Rhiannon took counsel with her advisers, and soon it was decided that it was best for her to accept whatever punishment she should be given. And this was her punishment: that for the space of seven years she should sit outside the gate of the court at Arberth and tell her story to whoever asked, and that she should then offer to carry them to the court on her back. Very few asked her to carry them. And in this wise Rhiannon passed part of a year.

It was at this time that the lord of Gwent Is Coed was a man named Teyrnnon Twrf Liant. Teyrnnon owned the finest mare in all the land, and every foal she produced was the best to be found anywhere. She would always foal on May Eve, but by morning the foal disappeared.

Teyrnon and his wife knew not what to do about this, for every time the mare gave birth, by morning the foal would be gone.

One May Eve, Teyrnon said to his wife, "By God, I shall surely find out what happens to those foals." And so he armed himself and had the mare brought into the house where he could watch over her. Once night had fallen, the mare dropped a fine, black foal. It was a sturdy little thing, and got to its feet immediately.

No sooner did the foal stand up but a long black arm burst through the window and grabbed the foal by its mane. Teyrnon drew his sword and slashed at the arm, cutting it off at the elbow. A terrible scream sounded from outside, and another noise that Teyrnon could not identify. He ran to the door to find out what the noise was, and there on the step he found a golden-haired baby boy, swaddled tightly in silken swaddling clothes that were richly embroidered.

Teyrnon picked up the child and brought it to his wife. "My wife, wake up. For here I have a son for you, if you want him."

Then Teyrnon told her the whole story. When he was done, she looked at the boy and saw how he was dressed. "Surely this is the son of some nobleman," she said. "If we are to keep him, we must first send out news that I was with child, and get our serving-women to say the same."

Teyrnon agreed, and it was done as his wife said. They took the boy into their home and raised him as his own. They had him baptized and named him Gwri Wallt Eurnyn, because he had golden hair. The boy grew quickly and well, and by the time he was a year old he had the growth and strength of a three year old. At the end of his second year, he was as big and strong as a six year old. By the time he was four, he wished to be allowed to work in the stables and care for the horses.

One day, Teyrnon's wife came to him and asked what had happened to the foal that was born the night they found their son .

"I told the stable hands to care for it," said Teyrnon.

"Perhaps it is time that it be trained, and then given to our son?" said his wife.

Teyrnon agreed, and so the horse was trained to carry a rider and given to Gwri for his own.

Soon after this, word of what had happened to Rhiannon and her punishment came to the court of Teyrnon. He listened to the tales carefully and felt sorry for the woman. He also looked very closely at Gwri and realized that the boy resembled Pwyll in every feature. Teyrnon knew Pwyll by sight, for once Pwyll had owed him fealty.

Teyrnon realized that he could not rightfully keep the boy, and this grieved him, for he loved Gwri well. But he knew that the boy must

be returned to his rightful parents, and that Rhiannon must be freed from her unjust punishment, so he went to his wife and told her what he intended. Teyrnon's wife listened to all her husband said and agreed that bringing Gwri to the court of Pwyll was the proper thing to do.

The next day Teyrnon and Gwri set out for Pwyll's court with two noble companions. When they arrived at the gate, Rhiannon rose and said, "Stay, for it is my punishment for having killed my own son that I should carry each of you on my back into the court."

"Nay, lady," said Teyrnon, "that you'll not do, for me, or for any who are with me."

Gwri also said that he would not let Rhiannon carry him, and the nobles said likewise. Teyrnon, Gwri, and their companions then went into the court of Pwyll, and they were given a warm welcome. Pwyll ordered a feast be prepared for them, and when the tables were ready Teyrnon sat between Pwyll and Rhiannon, and his two nobles above them with the boy Gwri between them.

After the feast was over, Teyrnon told his story about the foal and about the boy. He explained how he had taken the boy in to foster, and how he and his wife had raised him as their own.

"But when we heard the tale of Rhiannon's punishment," said Teyrnon, "we sorrowed greatly for it. We then realized that our Gwri must be your son indeed. If you look at the boy, it is clear that he could be no man's son save Pwyll's. We now return him to you, his rightful parents."

"How my cares would be lightened if what you say is true," said Rhiannon.

And all the nobles of the court looked at the boy and at Pwyll, and all agreed that the boy must be Pwyll's son.

"And what is his name?" asked one of Pwyll's nobles.

"We call him Gwri Wallt Eurn, but you may name him as you wish," said Teyrnon.

"Pryderi shall be his name," said Pwyll, "for that name means 'care,' and this was the first thing his mother said about him upon meeting him. "

Rhiannon and Pwyll and the nobles agreed that this was a fine name for the boy, and so he was known as Pryderi son of Pwyll Pen Annwfn ever after.

Then Pwyll turned to Teyrnon and said, "By God, I know no way to compensate you for the good upbringing you have given our son. But when he is grown, surely he will repay you in a fitting manner."

"My lord," said Teyrnon, "you should know that no one grieves for

the loss of the boy than does my wife, who loves him as a mother. He should remember her thus; that is my wish."

Pwyll then promised that Pryderi would never forget Teyrnnon and his wife, nor the care they had given him when he was a child. And Pwyll promised to ally himself and his realm with Teyrnnon and his domain, and that Pryderi would do the same after him. Then the boy was given to the nobleman Pendaran Dyfed to foster, but Pwyll also made Teyrnnon and his nobles foster fathers as well.

When it was time for Teyrnnon and his companions to leave, Pwyll and Rhiannon offered Teyrnnon many fine gifts of gold and silver and costly jewels, and of the best horses they had. But Teyrnnon would accept none of those, and he departed Pwyll's court much contented all the same.

And so Pryderi was brought up at the court of Pwyll Pen Annwfn, and soon there was none in all the land to match him for good looks or strength of body or deeds. And when Pwyll grew aged and died, Pryderi became the prince of Dyfed, and he conquered the three cantrefes, or counties, of Ystrad Tywi and the four cantrefes of Ceredigion besides. Pryderi took to himself a noble wife, and together they ruled wisely and well to the end of their days.

The Story of Culhwch and Olwen

In his edition of the Mabinogion, Patrick Ford notes the importance of horses at the birth of Gwri/Pryderi in the story of Pwyll of Dyfed, while in the story of Culhwch the animals involved are pigs. Ford traces these respectively to the Celtic horse-goddess Epona and the pig-god Moccus. By the time these stories were written down, these deities exist only as mere echoes, in the association of horses and pigs with the births of boy-heroes. Moccus also would appear to be represented in Culhwch's story by the monstrous boar Twrch Trwyth, who must be hunted and destroyed by King Arthur and his companions.

It is important to note that this is not quite the King Arthur that we are familiar with today. The Arthur of this tale is an earlier manifestation, one who exists in the realm of ancient Celtic myth and legend. Only later was he adopted as a Christianized hero-king and literary figure by medieval court culture, which is the more common source for modern retellings of Arthurian legends .

Once there was a prince of Wales named Cilydd, son of Celyddon, and he took to wife Goleuddydd, daughter of Prince Anlawdd. Cilydd's people rejoiced at this marriage, for it was a very good match, and they prayed that soon their prince might have a son and heir. They had not long to wait before their prayers were answered: Goleuddydd soon found herself with child.

All was not easy with Goleuddydd, however. She found that she could not abide being indoors, and so she went wandering about the countryside, never returning to her home and even sleeping under the stars or beneath the trees. When she felt it was close to the time for her to be delivered, she looked for shelter. There on the side of a mountain she found the abode of a swineherd. She went into the swineherd's hut, but she found the pigs so frightening that she immediately gave birth. She named the boy Culhwch, which means "place of the pigs," because that was where he was born. The swineherd recognized Goleuddydd, so when she was well enough to travel he returned her with her baby to the court of Prince Cilydd that the boy might be brought up amongst his own people, for not only was Culhwch the son of Cilydd, he also was cousin to King Arthur himself.

Culhwch grew quickly and well, but when he was still quite a small child his mother grew ill and died. When Goleuddydd was on her deathbed, she told Cilydd, "I know that you soon will wish to remarry, but I worry that your new bride will try to disinherit our son, Culhwch. I ask that you not take another wife until you see a briar with two blossoms upon it on my grave. I also bid that you tend my grave well and not neglect it."

Prince Cilydd promised Goleuddydd that she would do all that she asked him, and after she died and was buried he appointed a servant to tend the grave and keep it free from any kind of weed or briar. For seven years, the servant did his task well, but after that time he tired of it, and so the grave went untended.

It was at this time that the prince rode out to hunt, and bethought himself to visit the grave of Goleuddydd to see whether there might be anything growing upon it. He went to the place where she was buried and saw that a briar had begun growing in the middle of her grave, and upon that briar were two blossoms. The prince returned to his palace and summoned to him his wisest advisers. He asked them whether they knew of any well-born woman who might serve as a new wife.

"Yes," said one. "The wife of King Doged would do admirably."

Cilydd agreed that this was good advice. He sent a party of his choicest warriors to Doged's lands. There they killed Doged and captured his wife and daughter. They also scoured the towns and villages of that place and took their plunder back to Cilydd's domain. Cilydd took possession of Doged's lands, and took his widow to be his own wife, but Cilydd told her nothing about Culhwch, for he had not forgotten Goleuddydd's dying words to him about their son.

One day, Cilydd's new wife went for a walk through the countryside. She came upon a crude hut, in front of which sat an old woman with straggly white hair and but one tooth in her mouth. Now, Cilydd's wife had heard tales of this woman, and knew that she had a reputation for soothsaying. Cilydd's wife also had many questions about her new husband, questions she knew would be unwise to ask at court. She therefore approached the old woman and said, "Tell me, old woman, how is it that I have wed a childless man? Will I not have an heir by him?"

The old woman said, "Cilydd is not childless, and you are assured of producing an heir of your own body."

"Tell me of this child that Cilydd has," said the wife, for she was surprised to hear that her husband had been keeping this a secret.

"Cilydd has one son," said the old woman, "and his name is Culhwch."

Cilydd's wife returned home. She went straight to her husband and demanded to know why he had been keeping his son a secret from her. At first Cilydd tried to evade her questions, but finally he summoned Culhwch to him and presented the boy to his new stepmother. She looked the boy up and down and saw that he was handsome and well made in his body.

"You are a fine-looking lad," said his stepmother, "and you should think of marriage. I myself have a beautiful daughter who would make an excellent wife for you."

Culhwch replied, "That may be so, but I am not yet of an age to take a wife."

This angered his stepmother, and so she pronounced a curse upon him: "If you take not my daughter, then never shall you wed, except it be to Olwen, daughter of Ysbaddaden Pencawr, king of the giants!"

At this, Culhwch felt his whole body overcome with love for Olwen, a woman he had never met, and he vowed to himself that he would take her to wife.

Cilydd saw that the lad was blushing strangely, and asked, "What is the matter, my son? Have you taken ill?"

"No," said Culhwch, "but I have heard the fate foretold me by my stepmother, and I wish to see whether I might have the hand of Olwen, daughter of Ysbaddaden Pencawr, in marriage."

Cilydd said, "That should not be difficult for you, for you are nobly born and cousin to King Arthur himself. You should go to the court of Arthur and ask him for his aid in this matter. Tidy yourself, and get your hair cut, and then go and speak to Arthur."

The next morning, Culhwch set out for Arthur's court. He rode a fine grey steed, and his saddle and bridle were inlaid with much gold. Culhwch was richly dressed and armed with spear and sword in a manner befitting a prince, and he carried a fine hunting horn that was chased with silver. At Culhwch's side coursed two of the best hunting hounds, wearing golden collars inlaid with rubies. And the tread of Culhwch's mount was so light that it did not even bend the grass beneath his hooves as they cantered to the court of King Arthur .

When Culhwch reached the court of King Arthur, he found the gate closed and barred.

"Let me in," Culhwch said to the sentry.

"I cannot," said the sentry, "for the feast has already begun, and it is Arthur's law that none be allowed to enter save those who have been specially invited. But here outside the wall there is a guesthouse, where there is food and drink aplenty and a warm bed fit even for a noble prince, and stabling for your horse and your hounds. You may stay here the night, and seek audience of Arthur in the morning."

"I'll not wait," said Culhwch, "and if you open not the gate, I shall send up three shouts. The first shall be heard throughout all of Wales. The second shall be heard as far away as Ireland. And the third shall be so loud and so fierce that all the women in the land who now are with child shall miscarry, and those who are now barren shall remain so forevermore."

"Shout as you might," said the sentry, "I cannot unbar this gate save by permission of the king. I bid you wait while I ask him what I should do."

The sentry went into the hall where King Arthur sat a-feasting with his court. The king saw the sentry, and bid him say what had brought him into the hall.

"A warrior there is at the gate," said the sentry, "the likes of which I have never seen, neither for raiment, nor weapons, nor steed, nor hounds, nor for good looks, nor strength of body. As you well know, I have travelled to every land, to India, to Africa, to Norway, and to Greece, and all the places in between, and never have I seen such a youth as this. He craves audience with Your Majesty, and says he will not wait. I am here to ask whether I may admit him, despite your law."

Arthur said, "Surely such a man as this ought not to be kept waiting. I waive the law of the banquet hall for this special guest. Bid him enter, and make him welcome."

Then Kai, one of the knights of the king said, "If Your Majesty

pleases, I counsel that we not admit this man to our feast in defiance of the law."

Arthur replied, "I cannot take your counsel, my friend, for if I refuse this warrior entrance, it will bring great shame upon me and upon this court."

No sooner had Arthur said this, than Culhwch strode into the banqueting hall. All who saw him marveled, for the sentry's description had not done him justice. Arthur welcomed Culhwch warmly, and invited him to take a seat at table, where meat and wine would be brought to him.

"I come not for the feast," said Culhwch, "but to beg the aid of Your Majesty. And if you give me not your aid, great will be the shame upon you and upon your court."

"All that I have to give is yours," said Arthur, "save my weapons, and my ship, and my cloak, and my wife."

"First I wish that you should cut my hair," said Culhwch .

Arthur called for a comb and scissors to be brought. Culhwch was then seated before the king, and as Arthur combed and trimmed Culhwch's hair, he said, "Tell me now who you are, and of your family."

"I am Culhwch, son of Cilydd son of Celyddon, and my mother was Goleuddydd, daughter of Prince Anlawdd."

"Ah!" said Arthur. "Then we are cousins, surely. Doubly welcome you are to my court, kinsman. Now tell me what it is you require of me."

"I wish to wed Olwen, daughter of Ysbaddaden Pencawr, king of the giants," said Culhwch. "I beg your assistance in finding her and making her my bride."

Arthur admitted that he did not know who this young woman might be. Neither did any of his courtiers know of her, so Arthur pledged to send messengers throughout his kingdom to see where she might be found. Culhwch agreed that it should be done thus, and gave Arthur a year in which to find the girl.

And so the year passed, without any of the messengers being able to find Olwen or her people. Culhwch came before the court and said to Arthur, "I can wait no longer. If you can be of no help to me, then I must go on this quest by myself."

"Not so," said Kai, "for I will come with you."

"Yes," said Arthur. "It is wise that you take Kai as your companion. Also I will send others of my finest warriors, so that you will always have the best help."

Arthur called upon Kai and five others to be Culhwch's companions.

Each of these was a fearsome warrior, and each had other qualities and skills besides. Kai could hold his breath under water for nine days and nine nights, and he could go without sleep for the same space. If he wounded someone with his sword, that wound would never heal no matter how well it was tended. Kai could make himself grow until he was as tall as a tree, and with his body he could make enough heat that the rain could not touch whatever he carried, and even could start a fire with that heat.

Bedwyr One-Hand also went with Culhwch. Bedwyr was the fastest man in the kingdom. No one could match him for speed, save Arthur and one other, a man named Drych Ail Cybdar. Although Bedwyr had only one hand, he was as deadly in battle as three two-handed men, and his lance was so deadly that any wound made with it would be nine times greater than the lance of another warrior.

Cynddelig Cyfarwydd the guide also was summoned to go with Culhwch. No one knew the lands in Arthur's realm better than he, and none was his match at finding a path through unknown lands. The interpreter Gwyrhwr Gwstad Ieithoedd also was part of the company, for he spoke all languages, and Gwalchmai mab Gwyar also joined them, for he was the best horseman and the best fighter on foot. The last member of the company was Menw son of Teirgwaedd, who could cast a spell of invisibility about himself and his companions, so that unfriendly eyes could not see them.

Culhwch and his companions set out from Arthur's castle and travelled until they came to a wide plain. On the plain, far in the distance, was a castle the like of which they had never seen. The plain was so wide that it took them three days to cross it. When they finally neared the castle, they found an enormous flock of sheep between themselves and the castle. The shepherd was a huge, fearsome-looking man, sitting on a hillock near his flock, and next to him was a giant sheepdog, as large as a horse. What was more, the shepherd could throw flames out of his mouth at anyone who displeased him, and many charred trees and shrubs were all about.

Kai, Gwyrhwr, and Menw decided among themselves to speak to the shepherd. Menw said that he would cast a charm on him so that they might speak with him safely. The three companions strode up to the shepherd. "Greetings," they said to him. "Tell us, if you will, who you are, and who is master of that castle, and of all these fine sheep?"

"My name is Custennin, and surely everyone knows whose castle and whose herds these are," said the shepherd. "They belong to Ysbaddaden Pencawr, king of the giants. Why do you ask? What do you want here?"

"We are messengers from the court of King Arthur," said Kai, "and we are come to ask the hand of Olwen in marriage for one of our companions."

"Oh," said the shepherd, "I pity your friend and all your companions, if that truly is your errand. Many suitors have come to this land asking for the hand of Olwen, and not one has ever left here alive."

Culhwch thanked the shepherd for what he had told them, and gave him a golden ring as payment. The shepherd tried to put on the ring, but it would not fit his huge fingers, so he put it inside his glove and took it home to his wife. When he gave her the ring, she said, "Where did you find such a thing, husband?"

"I went to the shore to do some fishing, and there I found a dead man on the beach. The ring was on his hand, so I took it."

"A likely story," said the wife. "Show me this fine corpse that wears beautiful jewelry."

"Never fear," said Custennin. "You shall see him shortly. In fact, he and his friends likely will be here soon, to ask us for our hospitality for the night."

"Whatever do you mean?" said the wife.

"I mean that it is Culhwch, son of Cilydd son of Celyddon, whose mother was Goleuddydd daughter of Anlawdd, who is here. He is come to ask for the hand of Olwen in marriage."

The shepherd's wife was both happy and sad at this news. She was happy, because Culhwch was her sister's son, and sad because she knew that no one ever returned from the castle of Ysbyddaden Pencawr alive. But she had not time to dwell on this, because soon she heard the sounds of Culhwch and his companions approaching. She ran out to greet them and went to embrace the companions. First she went to Kai, but before she could touch him, Kai grabbed a huge log from the woodpile and thrust it between himself and the woman. The woman embraced the log instead, and soon it was nothing but a pile of splinters.

"It is fortunate that it was not I you embraced," said Kai.

The woman invited the companions into her house and provided them with food and drink. Then she went over to the fireplace, and opened a door that stood next to the mantelpiece. Behind the door was a small, secret room, and out of the secret room came a beautiful youth, who had curly, golden hair.

"What has he done, to be imprisoned in that room so?" said Gwrhyr.

"It is to save him that he hides in that secret room," said the wife.

"Twenty-four sons I once had, and now all of them are dead save him. All the others were slain by Ysbaddaden Pencawr, and our only

hope to keep this one alive is to hide him."

"Let him stay with me," said Kai. "I swear I shall protect him, and none shall harm him save they kill me first."

When the meal was finished, the shepherd's wife asked, "Tell me, now: why have you come here, and what is it you seek?"

"We come to seek the hand of Olwen for our friend Culhwch," said Kai.

"That is most unwise," said the woman. "If you value your lives, leave now, before anyone from the castle can see you."

"We will not," said Kai, "at least, not until we have seen the maiden."

"Is there a place she goes where we might see her without being seen?" said Gwrhyr.

"Yes," said the woman. "She comes here every Saturday to wash her hair. When she does, she puts one of her rings into a dish. She always forgets to take them back afterwards, and no one from the castle ever comes to get them, either. She comes tomorrow on this errand, and I will let you see her without yourselves being seen, but only if you promise to do her no harm."

Culhwch and his companions agreed that this was a good plan, and they made solemn promises not to harm the maiden.

The next morning, Olwen came to wash her hair. She wore a gown of silk, red as flame, and around her neck was a torc of red gold, studded with many gems. Her hair was shining gold, her skin whiter than milk, and her eyes brighter than those of the swiftest falcon. Wherever she trod upon the grass, white clover flowers would spring up, and it is for this reason she was called Olwen, which means "White Track."

As soon as Culhwch saw her, he stepped forward and said, "Lady, I greet you well, for I have always loved you. Come with me, for I would have you as my bride."

"I must not wed you," said Olwen, "not without my father's consent, because the moment I am wed, he will die. Instead I ask you to go to his castle and beg an audience with him. Whatever he asks you to do, agree to it without hesitation, for if you do what he asks then maybe he will allow us to marry. But do not hesitate, whatever he asks, otherwise he will kill you instantly."

"This I shall do," said Culhwch.

The next day, Culhwch and his companions set out for the castle where they had to go through nine gates. At each gate was a gatekeeper with a giant mastiff. Culhwch and his companions slew each gatekeeper with his dog, marched through each gate, and soon found themselves in the hall of Ysbyddaden Pencawr, king of the

giants.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" roared Ysbyddaden.

"We are here to ask the hand of your daughter Olwen in marriage to our companion, Culhwch son of Cilydd," said Kai.

"Where are my servants?" said Ysbyddaden. "Bring me the forks that hold up my eyelids, so that I can see this young fool who thinks to wed my daughter."

The servants brought the forks and placed them under the giant's eyelids. He looked Culhwch up and down. "So, you think to marry my Olwen, eh?" he said. "Come back tomorrow. You will have my answer then."

The companions turned to go, but as they did so, Ysbyddaden grasped one of the three poisoned spears that he kept behind his throne, and hurled it at Culhwch. But before the spear could find its mark, Bedwyr caught it in midair and flung it back at the giant. The spear struck Ysbyddaden in the knee, and he howled with pain. "I shall never be able to walk properly again!" he cried.

The companions returned to Custennin's house, where they feasted and rejoiced that they had survived their first encounter with the giant. The next day, they rose early and dressed and groomed themselves with care, so that they would look their very best when next they spoke to Ysbyddaden.

Again they went into the hall of the king of the giants. This time Gwrhyr spoke for the company.

"Give us Olwen to be the bride of Culhwch, and in exchange we will give you the usual dowry, plus gifts for you and for her kinswomen. But if you do not give her to us, you will die."

"You must wait for my answer," said Ysbyddaden, "for all of her great-grandparents are still alive, and I must ask their advice first."

"Very well," said Gwrhyr. "We shall go and eat while you speak with them. "

Again the companions turned to go, and again Ysbyddaden threw a poisoned spear at Culhwch. This time Menw it was who caught the spear and hurled it back. So fierce and strong was Menw's cast that the spear went straight through the giant, at the middle of his breast. "Alas!" cried the giant, "now I shall always have chest pains and indigestion!"

The companions returned to Custennin's house, where they ate and spent the night. In the morning, they returned to the giant's hall.

"Throw not another spear at us, O Giant," said Kai, "else you risk being killed by us!"

At this Ysbyddaden called for the servants to put the forks under his

eyelids so that he could see, and when this was done he grabbed the last spear and hurled it at Culhwch. This time it was Culhwch himself who caught the spear and flung it back, and it went straight into the giant's eye and came out the back of his neck. "Alas!" cried the giant, "now I shall have headaches forever, and my eye will always weep when I have to walk outside on a windy day!"

The companions again returned to the shepherd's house, and on the morrow went back to the giant's hall.

"Do not turn us away, O Giant," said Kai, "and do not throw any more spears at us, or we will surely kill you! Give us your daughter, to be the bride of Culhwch."

"Which one of you is Culhwch?" said Ysbyddaden.

Culhwch stepped forward. "I am Culhwch," he said.

"Come here and sit with me, so that we may discuss this matter," said the giant.

Culhwch went and sat with him.

"So, you have come to ask the hand of my daughter in marriage, yes?" said Ysbyddaden.

"Yes, I am," said Culhwch.

"First you must promise that you will always be entirely honest with me," said Ysbyddaden.

"I pledge honesty to you gladly," said Culhwch.

"Then I will give you my daughter, if you can do the deeds I command of you."

"You have but to ask," said Culhwch.

At this the giant named one task after another, each of them difficult and dangerous. Culhwch was to clear and plow a field that could not be plowed; he had to obtain a magic drinking-horn and a magic harp; he had to make a magic leash from the hairs of a beard of a fearsome warrior, because that was the only thing that would hold the hound Culhwch was to find; he had to get the sword of Wrnach the giant, and many other tasks besides. But the most difficult, dangerous, and important task was to get the comb, shears, and razor that rested between the ears of the giant boar Twrch Trwyth .

After each task Culhwch said, "It will be no trouble for me to do that." And after the very last task was named he said, "It will be no trouble to do any of that, for my kinsman Arthur will give me all the help I need."

Culhwch and his companions returned to the court of King Arthur. Not only did Arthur pledge his warriors to help accomplish everything Ysbyddaden had commanded, he himself went on the quest, as did the golden-haired son of Custennin the Shepherd,

whose name was Goreu.

Up and down the country went Arthur and his warriors, easily achieving everything Ysbaddaden had commanded, and they returned to Celli Weg in Cornwall, from where they would begin the task of getting the comb, shears, and razor from between the ears of Twrch Trwyth. Arthur called for Menw son of Teirgwaedd and said to him, "Go and look for Twrch Trwyth, and see whether the treasures are indeed between his ears. For I would not have us waste time and effort looking for him, if what we seek is not there."

Menw learned that the boar was in Ireland, so he went there to look for him. Soon enough, he found the boar's lair, and Menw caught a glimpse of the three treasures as the boar went inside. Menw turned himself in to a bird and waited. When the boar came out, Menw swooped down and tried to snatch one of the treasures, but he only managed to grasp a clawful of bristles. This enraged Twrch Trwyth, and he shook himself, sending poison flying from his hide. Some of the poison landed on Menw, and he was marked by it ever after.

Upon learning where the boar was, and that he did indeed have the three treasures, Arthur gathered a great company of warriors from as far away as Brittany. He also called to him all the finest hunting steeds and the finest coursing hounds, and soon he had such a mighty army that when he landed, the Irish were in great fear of him, and sent their holy men to treat with him and ask his protection upon them. Arthur agreed to this gladly, and the holy men provided him and his army with food.

Arthur and his army went to Esgair Oerfel, which is where the boar had his home, along with his seven young pigs. They loosed the hounds upon the boar and his brood. The Irish fought with them for the whole day, but to no avail, and a fifth of the country of Ireland was laid waste in the battle. The next day Arthur's army went with his army to fight the boar, and they fared little better. The day after that, Arthur himself went to fight with Twrch Trwyth. They fought for nine days and nine nights, and at the end of that battle only a single young pig had been killed.

When Arthur returned to camp after his fight, his men asked him, "Who is Twrch Trwyth?"

"He used to be a king," said Arthur, "but God changed him into a boar, as punishment for his sins."

Arthur called to him Gwrhryr Gwstad Ieithoedd and told him to go and try to talk to the boar. Gwrhryr turned himself into a bird. He flew over to the place where Twrch Trwyth lived with his brood, and he perched on a nearby branch .

"In the name of God," said Gwrhryr, "if any of you can speak, I ask

you to come out and talk to Arthur."

The young boar Grugyn Gwrych Eraint came forward. All of his bristles were like silver, and indeed the sparkle of them could be seen from far away. Grugyn said, "By the name of the One who put us into this form, we will not speak with Arthur, nor will we give him any help. Can you not see that we suffer enough as it is, without also being beset by Arthur and his warriors?"

Gwrhyr replied, "I must tell you that Arthur means to have the comb and shears and razor that are between the ears of Twrch Trwyth, and that he will fight for them."

"Then Arthur must come and fight," said Grugyn, "for Twrch Trwyth will never willingly part with his treasures while he is alive. But know this: tomorrow we leave for Arthur's lands, and wherever we go shall be laid waste."

Twrch Trwyth and his brood then set out across the sea for Wales, and came ashore at Porth Clais in Dyfed. Arthur followed along in his ship, Prydwen, and however he and his warriors chased the family of boars, they could come no closer to them, until finally they held him at bay in Cwm Cerwyn. There was a great fight, and Twrch Trwyth killed four of Arthur's finest warriors. Then another four came to fight with him, and the boar himself was wounded, although in the end those four warriors perished also at the tusks of Twrch Trwyth.

The next day, Arthur's men pursued Twrch Trwyth, and wherever they managed to hold him at bay, he slew them all. Twrch Trwyth ran all the way to Glyn Ystun, and it was there that Arthur's men lost him.

Arthur then called to him Gwyn son of Nudd. He asked whether Gwyn knew anything that might help them hunt and kill Twrch Trwyth, but Gwyn said that he did not. The men finally picked up the trail of the great boar and his brood. They hunted them up and down the country, setting the hounds on them and turning them to bay, only to have the boar and the young pigs kill the hunters and get away. Finally all but Twrch Trwyth and two of his sons were killed. They separated, and the hunters pursued them in different directions. One young pig went to Ceredigion, where he slew many of the hunters but finally was brought down. Another young pig went to Ystrad Yw, and the same thing happened there.

The track of Twrch Trwyth himself was leading towards Cornwall.

"By God," said Arthur, "I'll not let that boar get into Cornwall. This chase has gone on long enough. Let us but find him and will fight him myself."

So a band of picked men went to block the path of Twrch Trwyth

and turn him back to where Arthur was waiting. They caught up with the great boar, and forced him into the River Hafren. Many warriors pursued the boar into the water on their horses. The men grabbed Twrch Trwyth by the feet and held him so that he was under the water. Mabon son of Modron drew alongside the boar and grabbed the razor from him. Cyledyr Wyllt drew along the other side and snatched the shears. But before anyone could get the comb, Twrch Trwyth managed to get purchase on the bed of the river and kick his way free. He surged out of the water, and then ran so fast that neither horse nor hound could draw close to him, and in this way he reached Cornwall.

Arthur and his men pursued Twrch Trwyth throughout Cornwall. When they finally cornered the beast, there was a terrific fight the likes of which had never been seen before, and which was fiercer than any they had had with the boar since they first started chasing him. But after this fight, Arthur finally managed to snatch the comb. Twrch Trwyth turned tail and ran. He came to the shore, where he did not stop but instead ran straight into the sea, and he was never seen nor heard from again after that.

Arthur returned to where Culhwch was waiting, having won all the treasures that Ysbyddaden required. Then they set out for the giant's court. Goreu son of Custennin the Shepherd went with them, for he had cause to hate Ysbyddaden for killing all his brothers and making him live a prisoner's life.

They reached the court of Ysbyddaden, and showed him all the things they had achieved. Then Caw of Prydyn took the comb and shears and razor of Twrch Trwyth and shaved Ysbyddaden. He shaved the giant's beard, and his flesh straight down to the bone, and his ears as well.

And Culhwch said, "Have you been thoroughly shaven?"

Ysbyddaden replied, "That I have."

"And is your daughter now free to be my bride?" said Culhwch.

"That she is," said the giant. "But do not thank me for it, but rather Arthur, for it is by his deeds that you have her at all. If it had been left to me, you never would have had her. And now it is time to put an end to me."

At that Goreu son of Custennin took the giant by the hair and struck off his head. Then he fixed the head to a post at the gate of the castle, and took for himself all the giant's lands and possessions. Arthur and all his warriors returned to their own lands. Culhwch wed Olwen, and they were happily married to the end of their days. And that is the tale of how Culhwch won Olwen.

PART III

Cornwall and Brittany

The Drowned City of Ys

This story from Brittany places ancient Celtic elements, such as druidesses and Otherworldly creatures, within the struggle of the old Celtic faith against the spread of Christianity. We have already seen this conflict in the Irish tale of the Children of Lir, which casts the children first as tragic victims of Christianization and then later converts to that religion. In the present tale, however, the character of Dahut, who is the product of the union between a human king and an Otherworldly sea maiden, is drawn as wicked, murderous, and willfully opposed to Christianity. Whereas the Children of Lir ultimately are saved through the actions of Christians, Dahut brings about her own downfall and that of the City of Ys when she consorts with a stranger who likely represents the Christian Devil.

Once, long ago, there was a great city in Brittany called Ys. No one today knows exactly where it was, for it was lost beneath the sea. Some say that the ruins of Ys lie in the Baie de Trepasses. Some say that they lie in the Baie de Douarnenez. But wherever the city may lie, on some nights those who live on the coast of Brittany hear the bells of Ys ringing out ghostly across the waters of the sea. And when the people hear those bells, they shiver, and think of the tale of how the city was built, and how it was lost, all those many years ago.

The tale begins in the kingdom of Cornouaille, which was ruled by King Gradlon. Gradlon was a wise and generous king. He always tried to rule justly, and he worshiped the old gods, for Christianity had not yet come to that part of France. Gradlon had but one daughter, whose name was Dahut. She had skin as pale as ivory, eyes as dark as coals, and long black hair that flowed like a river. Dahut's mother had come from the sea, having fallen in love with the handsome, kingly Gradlon from afar. The sea-maiden enchanted the king one day, so that he took her to wife, but then he displeased her, and so she returned to the sea and was never seen again. But before she left, she bore Gradlon a daughter, and Gradlon loved Dahut more than anything else in the world, for she reminded him of her mother, his lost queen.

One day, Gradlon and some of his courtiers went hunting in the forest of Menez-Hom where the hounds flushed out a great wild boar. Gradlon and his courtiers spurred their mounts to the chase. They raced through stands of trees and across streams. They pushed

through thickets and bounded over fallen logs. But no matter how hard the hunters rode, and no matter how swiftly the hounds coursed after the boar, they could not catch it.

Finally, Gradlon called a halt to the chase. The hounds and the horses were spent, and so were the hunters. As they paused to catch their breath, the men looked about them and realized they had no idea where they were. They had been so intent on following the boar that they had paid no attention to the path they had taken. They were utterly lost, in a part of the forest none of them had ever seen before, and the sun was beginning to set.

"Let us head in that direction," said one of the courtiers, pointing towards the west. "I am certain we crossed a stream there, and at the very least we can water the animals while we decide what to do next."

Gradlon agreed that this was wise advice, so the king and his companions turned towards the west and went slowly towards the place where the courtier thought the stream had been. They rode for some minutes with no sign of a stream, but then they came upon a clearing in which was a small hut, with a well nearby. One of the courtiers dismounted and went to the hut. In answer to his knock, a man in a monk's habit came to the door.

"Welcome to my hermitage," said the monk. "My name is Corentin. How may I serve you?"

"Greetings," said the courtier. "We are a party of hunters who have become lost in the forest. We saw your hut, and have come to ask whether you might direct us back to the city of Quimper. For the leader of our party is Gradlon, king of Cornouaille."

"Certainly," said Corentin. "I will be pleased to help His Majesty and all of you get home safely. But I see that you have had a long and tiring hunt, and your animals are spent. May I offer you hospitality, so that you might refresh yourselves and your animals before you travel on?"

Gradlon and his courtiers gratefully accepted Corentin's invitation. First Corentin spread a beautiful white cloth on the clean, soft grass in front of his hut for Gradlon to sit upon. Then he went into his hut and fetched out a large basket and a large flagon. While some of the courtiers tended to the horses and hounds, others followed Corentin to the well, where first he filled the flagon with clear water. Then he plunged his hand into the well and brought out a little fish. He cut the fish in half with a knife he carried on his belt. One half of the fish he put into the basket, while the other he tossed back into the well. The courtiers looked where the piece had fallen into the well and were amazed to see that the little fish once again was whole .

Corentin returned to the place where Gradlon was sitting, carrying the flagon and the basket. When he put these down upon the white cloth, the basket immediately became full of all the choicest foods, and the flagon with the best red wine. Gradlon and his courtiers feasted on all the good things that came from the basket. There was plenty for all, and enough to satisfy the hounds besides. The king pronounced the wine the finest he had ever tasted and, what was more, no matter how much the companions and their host drank, the flagon was always full, and no one became drunk.

During the meal, Corentin and Gradlon conversed together. Corentin told the king and his courtiers of the Gospels and the ways of the Christian faith, answering every question that was put to him. Gradlon found Corentin to be a wise and learned man. He listened carefully and well to everything the hermit had to say. By the end of the meal, Gradlon and his courtiers had decided to become Christians, and Corentin baptized them with water from the well.

Soon it was time for Gradlon and his companions to depart. "Come with me back to Quimper," the king said to Corentin. "Your wisdom and teachings are sorely needed there."

At first Corentin was reluctant, because he loved his little hermitage in the woods. But then he decided to go with the king, for he realized there was much work for him to do in bringing the Gospel to the people of Cornouaille. Under Corentin's guidance, many of the king's subjects converted to Christianity, and churches were built all across Quimper.

Gradlon was well pleased with the spread of the new faith, as were his courtiers and many of his subjects, and especially Corentin, who had not expected to meet with such success. Dahut, however, became unhappy and withdrawn. She kept to her chamber, and often seemed to be weeping. When she was not in her chamber, she was at the top of the westernmost tower of the palace, where she would sit looking out in the direction of the sea.

One day Gradlon noticed how sickly Dahut looked. "My daughter," he said, "will you not tell me what it is that troubles you so?"

Dahut replied, "Quimper is no longer hospitable to me. There are churches everywhere now. The churches are full of priests and monks who can do nothing but chant without ceasing, even when they go about in the streets. The bells that rang for the old festivals no longer sound, and instead we hear bells for the new faith. The old gods have been forsaken. Joy is gone from the world."

"What can I do to ease your pain?" said Gradlon.

"Build for me a city by the sea," said Dahut, "for I feel it always calling to me. I think I would be happy again if I could live where I

could see the waves and feel their spray, and smell the salt of the water."

Gradlon agreed that it should be done as Dahut asked. He caused a great city of stone to be built on the coast, with elegant houses whose walls were paneled with cedar and with real glass panes in the windows. Gradlon also ordered a new palace to be built there, so that betimes he could join his daughter when his duties in Quimper permitted.

When the city was finished, it was given the name of Ys. The City of Ys prospered, for it was soon filled with merchants and artisans who traded far and wide, and fishermen who plied the waters of the bay to feed the inhabitants. But for all its splendor, the City of Ys contained not a single church of the new faith.

Dahut was delighted with the new city. Within a few days of living there, her former health and good humor returned. Gradlon himself soon found that living there was so pleasant that he moved his court to Ys, and there he dwelled in the new palace with Dahut, leaving Corentin to administer Quimper on his behalf as Bishop of Cornouaille.

Word that there was no church in Ys soon came to the ears of Corentin, who wrote to the king asking why he had neglected to honor the Lord with even one house of worship. Just as Gradlon was reading Corentin's letter, Dahut came to her father to discuss an important matter. She had looked out over the city, and saw that it needed a seawall to protect it from flooding if ever there were a great storm. But when she saw Corentin's letter and heard of his demand that Gradlon build a church, she fell into a rage.

"You built Ys so that I might have a place without churches and priests," Dahut said. "And now I see I shall never be free of them."

Dahut was convinced that her father would do Corentin's bidding first, and leave the seawall until later, so she decided to take matters into her own hands. That night she stole away to the beach and took a small sailboat. She sailed out to the Isle of Sein, a mysterious place off the coast from which, it was said, visitors never returned. Not only was the Isle dangerous to approach because of its many reefs and submerged rocks: also it was inhabited by nine druidesses who still practiced the old faith. It was said that these druidesses were able to change their shapes at will, and that they were served by Korrigans, a race of faerie beings who had not yet fallen victim to the new faith.

When Dahut neared the Isle, she furled the sail and bent her back to the oars. She navigated the rocks and the reefs with skill, and when the time was right, jumped out of her little boat and pulled it up

onto the sand. Dahut stood on the beach for a long moment, trying to decide which way to go, when she heard the sound of women chanting. She went in the direction of the sound, which was coming from a stand of oak trees toward the center of the island. When she got closer, she saw that a fire was burning in a clearing, and around the fire were the nine druidesses, singing magical songs of the old faith. The women noticed Dahut standing there, and stopped their song.

Dahut said to them, "I am Dahut, daughter of Gradlon, king of Cornouaille. I am a follower of the old faith, and I have come to ask for your help. "

The eldest woman stepped forward and said, "You are most welcome, Dahut daughter of Gradlon, and daughter of the old faith. We here are but the few who remain who still know the old ways, but what we can do to serve you we will do."

Dahut explained to them how Gradlon had built Ys for her without any Christian churches, and how he now planned to change that because of the demand of Corentin. She also told them that Ys needed a seawall, for it was built very close to the coast and was in danger of flooding, but that Gradlon planned to build the church first and thus leave the city unprotected from the sea while that was being done.

The druidesses listened carefully to Dahut's request, and agreed to help her. Using their magic, they called to them the Korrigans. The women asked the Korrigans to go to Ys and build the seawall before the night was done, but also to build a grand new palace for Dahut to live in, one that would be taller and more beautiful than any church ever could be. The Korrigans said that they would gladly build the wall and the palace for a daughter of the old faith, and then they vanished.

Dahut thanked the women for their help. Then she went back to her boat and returned to Ys. As she came within sight of the city, she saw that the seawall and new palace had already been finished. They were made out of blocks of white stone perfectly carved and polished. They reflected the moonlight in such a way that they looked as though they were glowing with a light of their own. In the seawall was a massive sluice gate, which could be controlled with a set of silver keys. Once again Dahut furled the sail of her boat and rowed toward shore. When she went through the open gate, she saw that the keys were waiting for her there in the locks, looped with a silver chain. Steadying her boat against the inside of the seawall, Dahut turned the keys, closing the sluice gate. She took the keys, and put the chain around her neck.

In the morning, Gradlon went looking for his daughter and found her in the new palace. He marveled at the new seawall and the grandeur of Dahut's new home. Gradlon asked her many times how the wall and the palace had sprung up overnight, but Dahut refused to answer him, although she gave him the keys to the sluice gate, asking him to always keep them safe.

After the seawall and the new palace were built, people came from far and wide to see the beautiful City of Ys. The city prospered greatly with new trade, and became even wealthier than it had been before. The people wore the finest clothes. They ate and drank only the choicest foods and wines. On festival days they danced the most fashionable dances, to music played by the best musicians. Soon they began to forget to attend Mass, instead preferring to spend their Sundays and holy days in feasting and revelry, until the beautiful church Gradlon had built fell into disrepair.

But above all its other charms, the City of Ys was home to the most beautiful woman in the world, Dahut, daughter of Gradlon, king of Cornouaille. Young men from all over France came to Ys in hopes of a glimpse of Dahut, and with the ambition of one day becoming her lover. Dahut encouraged this, taking one young man after another into her palace, where she would dally with them for a time, then kill them and cast their bodies into the sea when she tired of them.

Rumors began to spring up about the young men who went into the palace but never came out again. Gradlon heard these rumors, but he brushed them aside. Dahut was his beloved daughter. Surely such vile things were being said only out of jealousy of her beauty and her achievements. After all, the new prosperity of the City of Ys was entirely to her credit.

It did not take long for tales about the City of Ys and its inhabitants to reach Bishop Corentin in Quimper. Horrified by the lives of luxury the people of Ys were leading, and by their neglect of the sacred rites of the new faith, Corentin sent for the Abbot of Landevennec, a wise and humble man named Guenole. Corentin asked Guenole to go to Ys, to see what might be done to turn the people from their evil ways so that they might embrace the true faith once again.

Guenole went to Ys. He saw the people in their fine clothes dining at their great banquets. He saw the poor state of the church, its floor covered in dust so thick that small clouds of it puffed into the air with every step he took. He knew there was no time to waste, so he stood outside the church and began to preach to the people of Ys as they strode by on their daily business. Some of them stopped to listen for a little while, but did not linger, for they did not care

about what Guenole had to say. Others heckled him, and still others pelted him with stale vegetables, mocking him for his humble demeanor and plain monk's habit, and for daring to tell them to reform their lives. When Abbot Guenole refused to stop preaching, the people of Ys became angry, and they chased him out of the city, threatening to kill him if he ever dared return.

Some days after the departure of Guenole, a new suitor came to Ys seeking an audience with Dahut. The suitor was tall and well built, with dark hair and dark eyes, and he rode a black horse. He wore a suit of red cloth and a heavy red cloak lined with red silk. Word came to Dahut about this handsome stranger newly arrived in the city, one more fascinating than all the rest. At first Dahut paid this no mind, for there always seemed to be no end to the stream of good-looking young men seeking her favor. But one day Dahut's maid pointed the stranger out to her, and Dahut agreed that he was unusually compelling.

Having disposed of her most recent lover the previous night, Dahut decided to hold a banquet for her suitors so that she might choose a new one to toy with, but especially that she might meet this latest arrival who was dressed all in red. At the banquet, Dahut behaved graciously to all the young men who thronged around her. She danced with all of them, and let them bring her cakes and wine. But the one who most held her attention was the stranger in red. Although he returned Dahut's courtesy, he remained aloof and did not strain himself to come to her notice. This intrigued her all the more, so at the end of the evening, she invited him up to her private chamber .

When they arrived at her chamber, Dahut invited the stranger to make love to her, but he refused.

"Why do you refuse me this thing?" said Dahut. "A strange young man you surely must be, to scorn the favors of a beautiful young woman."

"I refuse them only because you must first do a favor for me," he replied.

"You have but to name it," said Dahut.

"Give me the keys to the sluice gate," said the stranger.

"I do not have them," said Dahut. "They are in the keeping of King Gradlon."

"Then you must go and get them," said the stranger, "for you will not have what you desire of me until I have those keys in my possession."

Dahut told the stranger to wait, and went out into the corridor. She could hear the wind rising outside, as it blew and moaned around

the walls of the castle. Paying the storm no mind, Dahut crept into the chamber of the king, where he lay asleep with the keys around his neck on their silver chain. Carefully, Dahut removed the keys without waking Gradlon, and stole back to where the stranger awaited her. She gave the keys to the stranger, but instead of embracing her, he strode out of the chamber and down to the seawall, where he put the keys in the locks and opened the sluice gate. Storm-driven water soon flooded into the city.

Hearing the cries of Dahut, Gradlon awoke. He went to his daughter, then ran with her down to the stables. There they found Guenole had returned, and was waiting with two horses already saddled. The men mounted, and Gradlon pulled Dahut up behind him. They thundered through the city, the dark water swirling ever higher around the horse's hooves. But no matter how fast the king's horse galloped, it could not outrun the rising tide of the sea; the animal seemed to be hindered by a great weight.

Suddenly, the king heard the voice of Guenole calling to him over the roar of the wind and the waves:

"Throw the demon off your mount, O King! Throw her into the sea where she belongs!"

Gradlon looked behind him, but saw no demon, only his beloved daughter. His horse was tiring rapidly, and now the water was up to its hocks.

"Throw the demon off!" cried Guenole.

But Gradlon could not think what the monk meant.

"It is Dahut that holds back your mount!" said Guenole. "It is she who gave the keys to the sluice gate to her demon suitor. If you do not push her off, you will perish along with the rest of the City of Ys, for it is doomed. "

Still Gradlon hesitated, but Guenole spurred his mount to run alongside the king's. Taking his staff, the monk pushed Dahut off the king's horse and into the water, where she slipped under the waves, and was never seen again. As soon as she was gone, the storm began to subside, and Gradlon's horse was able to gallop strongly again.

Gradlon and Guenole rode hard, making for higher ground. When they reached a place they thought might be safe, they turned and looked back at the City of Ys, only to see its buildings begin to crumble and fall. Then, with a great roar and rush of spray, the whole of the city sank into the sea.

There the City of Ys lies still, ruined and silent beneath the rolling waves, but on moonlit nights the faint sound of its drowned bells still can be heard ringing. And some say that at times a voice also can be heard singing, and that a young woman with skin like ivory

and dark hair that flows like a river can be seen swimming gracefully under the water, ever searching for her lost palace.

The Romance of Tristan and Iseult

There are no surviving ancient Cornish myths, but the medieval story of Tristan and Iseult, which is set in Cornwall, has an analogue in "The Pursuit of Diarmuid and Grainne," an Irish story about the forbidden love between a young warrior and the bride of the king the warrior serves.

It is important to note that the word "romance" here refers not to a type of love but to a medieval literary genre known in Old French as the roman, which often although not always involves characters engaged in amour courtois, or "courtly love," which is where we get many of our modern notions about romantic love. A courtly love relationship was between an unmarried knight and a lady who was married to someone else, usually the knight's lord; therefore the knight and lady were expected to remain chaste despite their feelings for one another.

Many medieval variants of the story of Tristan and Iseult survive. The retelling below is based on the modern edition by Joseph Bernier, which was compiled from French sources.

Once there was a king in Cornwall, named Mark, and he was beset by many enemies who were trying to wrest his kingdom from him. Word of this came to Mark's friend, Rivalen, who himself was king of Lyonesse over the sea in France. Rivalen brought his army to Cornwall to help Mark. Together the two kings fought bravely alongside their soldiers, and when the war was over, Mark was victorious. In gratitude for Rivalen's courage and help, Mark gave him his sister Blanchefleur to be his wife, and Rivalen loved her well.

Blanchefleur soon was with child, but Rivalen did not live to see him born, for the king was caught in an ambush laid by Duke Morgan, who had attacked the kingdom of Lyonesse and was laying it waste. When she was told that her husband was slain, the Lady Blanchefleur gave herself up to grief, waiting only for the time when her child might be born. She soon was delivered of a fine baby boy, to whom she said, "In sorrow I have borne you, in sorrow I leave you: therefore let your name be Tristan, for that is 'child of sorrow.'" And then Blanchefleur lay back on her pillows and breathed her last. Tristan was taken in to foster by Rivalen's marshal, Rohalt, a good man who loved his master well and who wanted to protect Rivalen's heir from Duke Morgan. He raised Tristan as his own, bringing him up well in the ways of a nobleman's son. Soon Tristan had grown into a fine young man: none could match him for strength or skill or

courtesy. By evil chance was Tristan taken by pirates when he went to the harbor to look at the wares brought in by merchants from a far-off land. They were not far out to sea when a storm came up that threatened their ship. Thinking that it was their crime that had brought the storm upon them, the pirates put Tristan in a little boat and lowered it into the water. The storm immediately calmed, and the pirates sailed away. Tristan then was cast alone and friendless up onto the shores of Cornwall, where he soon fell in with some of the king's huntsmen. Tristan returned with them to Mark's court at Tintagel, where he offered himself in service to the king. Soon he became beloved of Mark and all the court, although he hid to them his parentage.

One day, Rohalt came to the court of Tintagel on an errand, and recognized his foster son. He rejoiced at seeing Tristan again, alive and whole, when he had thought him dead, and Tristan likewise was gladdened to see the man he thought of as his father. They went to Mark, and there disclosed to him the truth of Tristan's name and station. Tristan begged of Mark arms and men to avenge his father and to rid Lyonesse of the evil duke. Mark agreed, gladly, knighting Tristan himself that very day. Tristan sailed for Lyonesse on the morrow with his army, and soon they had routed the duke's men and put them to flight, while the duke himself was slain by Tristan in single combat.

Wishing to return to Mark's service, Tristan gave all his lands to Rohalt and his heirs, with the agreement of the nobles of Lyonesse. Then Tristan bade farewell to Rohalt and returned to Cornwall, taking with him only the Squire Gorvenal, who had been his master-at-arms when he was a boy.

When Tristan and Gorvenal arrived at Tintagel, they found Mark and his court in great distress. For fifteen years, the king of Ireland had demanded a heavy tribute of slaves, which Mark had refused to pay. Therefore an Irish knight named Morholt, brother of the queen of Ireland has come with his companions to tell Mark that the Irish would invade Cornwall and lay it waste unless either he paid the tribute or Morholt was defeated by a Cornish champion in single combat.

Morholt spoke his challenge boldly in the great hall of Tintagel, but none of the nobles of the court dared take it up until Tristan begged to be allowed to defend the honor of Cornwall. Mark hesitated, for he loved Tristan well, and did not want to lose such a fine knight in the flower of his youth. But Tristan persisted, and finally Mark relented. Morholt agreed that he would meet Tristan in battle on the morrow, on St Sampson's Isle.

At the appointed time, Morholt and Tristan sailed to the island, both well-armed and each alone in his own boat. The knights saluted one another, and their battle commenced. Such a fight had never been seen before in either Cornwall or Ireland, and doubtless such a fight has never been seen since. Both knights struck mighty blows upon shields, and parried mighty blows with their blades, and the din of it was like the sound of a hundred smiths all fast at their work.

On shore, King Mark and his court anxiously awaited news of the victor, as did the Irish nobles. Hour by hour no word came from St Sampson's Isle, until the vespers-bell rang. Then one of Mark's courtiers pointed out to sea and shouted, "Look!"

There on the horizon was the sail of Morholt's boat, and the boat of Tristan nowhere to be seen. Cornishmen and Irishmen alike barely dared breathe waiting to see who it was at the helm of that boat. Soon enough it came into the harbor, with Tristan proudly standing in the bows and Morholt lying mortally wounded by the mast. Nobles rushed to pull the boat to shore. Tristan jumped out and showed his sword to the Irishmen: a piece of it was broken off near the tip of the blade.

Tristan said, "Men of Ireland! Your knight fought well and bravely, but in the end the victory was to Cornwall. See here my sword: the piece that is missing you will find lodged in your champion's head. That piece of my sword is the tribute of Cornwall. Take it therefore to your king in Ireland."

Tristan then returned to the castle of Tintagel, crowds cheering his victory while bells rang in all the churches of the city. Tristan smiled and accepted the thanks and praise of his countrymen, but when he finally reached the court and the crowds were shut outside the gate, he crumpled into the arms of King Mark, senseless with utter weariness and the wounds he had received.

The Irishmen for their part took up the body of Morholt and returned to their own land. They sorrowed greatly, for not only had Morholt had great strength of arms, but he was also much beloved by the king and queen and all their court. When they arrived, they gave Morholt over into the care of his sister, the queen, and her daughter, Iseult. Both women were well skilled in the healing arts, and had often tended Morholt and other knights of their household when they returned wounded from battle. But they could not mend such a fatal wound, and soon Morholt was dead, with the fragment of Tristan's blade still lodged in his head. Then the queen and Iseult grieved heavily for the death of their kinsman, and when they were done with their weeping, Iseult went to the body of Morholt and drew forth the piece of Tristan's sword, which she set in a secret

place for safekeeping. And from that day forth, Iseult set her heart against Tristan, and vowed vengeance upon him for the death of her uncle.

But neither was Tristan quickly healed of his hurts, for Morholt had struck him with a poisoned lance. The wound festered, despite the ministrations of the best doctors in all Cornwall. Finally Tristan knew that his death was not far off. He begged Mark to have a boat prepared for him, for he wished to be placed in it along with his harp and then pushed out to sea, where he might die in peace, for on the sea had he come to Cornwall those many years ago. For many days, the king refused this request, but soon even Mark saw that Tristan was dying, and so had the boat readied. Mark, Gorvenal, and the Seneschal Dinas, who also loved Tristan well, set him in his boat with his harp. They pushed him out into the retreating tide, where they watched until the little craft floated beyond their sight.

For many days, Tristan floated on the waves in his little boat. He played his harp and sang to keep himself company, and one day this sound came to the ears of some fishermen. It was a strange and haunting song, for Tristan's voice was weak and he could not sing or play for more than a few moments together. The fishermen followed the sound of the music, and when they came upon Tristan they took him into their own craft, where he closed his eyes and scarcely seemed to breathe. The fishermen sailed as quickly as they could for the harbor, for they saw that Tristan was gravely wounded and likely to die. Once ashore in their own country, they bore Tristan to the lady of the castle that was nearby, for she was known far and wide as a healer.

Tristan was brought to a chamber and put into a soft, clean bed, and the lady tended him well. His festering wound soon closed and healed, and when his fever had abated he came to himself and found a beautiful lady with long golden hair sitting by his bedside.

"If it please my lady," said Tristan, "tell me who you are and what place this is."

"This is the castle of Whitehaven," said the lady, "and I am Iseult, the daughter of the king of Ireland."

Then Tristan understood the grave danger he was in, for surely the Irishmen would have no love for the knight who had bested their finest champion and deprived them of rich tribute.

Then the lady spoke. "I have told you my name," she said. "Now favor me with yours."

"My name is Tramtris," he said, knowing that his true name would likely mean the death of him. "I had undertaken a journey to Spain

to learn what I could of the harpers there when pirates beset our ship. They wounded me, as you see. I managed to escape, but my companions all perished when their ship sank."

Now, the Lady Iseult had never seen Tristan before, so she had no reason to believe his story false. Tristan spent many days at the court of Whitehaven, and although there he saw many of the nobles who had come to Cornwall with Morholt, none recognized him, so ravaged was he by the illness brought on by his wound.

Under Iseult's care, Tristan soon regained his former strength. And one night, when he deemed the time right, he fled the castle and made his way back to Cornwall, where he was received with joy by King Mark and all the court .

While King Mark and the people of Cornwall loved Tristan well, four nobles there were who envied Tristan his beauty and prowess, and the trust he had of King Mark. And the names of these four were Andret, Guenelon, Gondoit, and Denoalen. It came to their ears that King Mark, who was both unwed and childless, intended to make Tristan his heir, rather than choosing from among the nobles. Therefore the four went to the king, demanding that he take to himself some noble wife, else they would band together and assail Tintagel until Mark was overthrown. Even so, Mark was steadfast, saying that he would have none other than his own dear nephew sit on the throne of Cornwall.

Tristan for his part liked it not, for he knew the nobles deemed that he served Mark not out of love, but that he should gain the throne after Mark's death. Feeling the wound to his honor, Tristan went to Mark and said that he agreed with the nobles, and that if needs must he would leave Cornwall, unless the king were to take to himself a wife and thereby produce a rightful heir. At this Mark finally bowed to the demands of his court, and said that they would be answered after the space of forty days, although he himself despaired of finding a noble bride both agreeable to himself and also acceptable to his court.

One day, while Mark sat at the window thinking on how to find himself a bride, he saw two little birds flitting about, arguing over which of them should have the thing that one clutched in its beak. As they quarreled, the one let the thing fall. It glittered and shone as it fell, golden in the sunlight, so Mark put his hand out the window to catch it. When he had it in his hand, he saw that it was a single, long, golden hair.

Mark took the hair and showed it to his court. "My lords," he said, "I have found who I shall have for my bride. Find for me the woman from whose head this came, and her I will wed."

At this the nobles fell silent, for they knew that Mark was mocking them by this challenge. The four who had first counselled him to marry muttered to each other that Tristan must be the author of the trick, and they looked darkly at him. Tristan knew what they did, so he stood in the middle of the hall and said, "My liege, I beg of you the right to undertake the quest to find the Lady of the Golden Hair. And I vow not to return to Tintagel but with that lady." For Tristan had bethought him of Iseult, daughter of the king of Ireland and her long, fair hair.

King Mark had no choice but to grant this request, so Tristan summoned Gorvenal and a hundred good knights and sailed with them to Ireland. There Tristan and his knights set about pretending to be merchants, while awaiting a chance that would let them bring the Lady Iseult back with them to Cornwall.

One evening, as Tristan and his companions dined in a tavern, the sound of a great wailing roar floated down from the hills and through the air of the town. Tristan asked the landlord what sound that was, for neither he nor any of his friends had ever heard anything so fearsome, and it made even their brave blood run cold .

"That is the voice of the dragon," said the landlord. "Betimes it comes down from its den in the mountains and threatens to burn the town and lay the lands about waste unless we give to it a young maiden. When it roars thus, we know we have until the next evening to choose a maiden to be its prize.

"A score of knights and more have tried already to kill it, but none have come back alive, and more's the pity, for the king himself has said that whoever slays the beast shall have his daughter Iseult to be his bride, and she is the most beautiful woman in all the world. Ah, me," sighed the landlord, who was a grizzled man and shaped like one of his own beer barrels, "were I but twenty years younger and three stone lighter, I myself might even chance that quest, for the Lady Iseult is like none other."

It was then that Tristan knew what he must do. First he asked a question or two more, that he might learn the way to the dragon's lair, but without disclosing his intent. Then he and his companions thanked the landlord for his tale and for the meal. They paid their fare, and then returned to their ship as though they planned to spend the night there, as was their custom. But instead of going to their rest, they helped arm Tristan in secret, and when the harbor and the town at last were all fast asleep, they mounted him on his horse and away he rode to meet the dragon.

On the way to the beast's lair, Tristan saw five armed men come galloping down the road towards him. He hailed them and asked

whether he was on the right road to find the dragon. They pulled up their mounts, and one of them said, "That you are, but if you were a wiser man, you would turn around this instant. For that beast surely comes straight from the mouth of Hell itself."

Then the five put spurs to their horses and were away with great speed. Tristan resumed his journey, and soon came into the domain of the dragon. Once the beast had snuffed the scent of Tristan's horse, it came barreling out of its den, nostrils streaming smoke. It was as long as the great hall in the castle Tintagel, with claws red as blood and long and sharp as scythes, and a great maw full of teeth like the tusks of an elephant but sharper than any sword. Also it was covered in great, gleaming scales all over its back and legs, and its great serpent's eyes glowed with a malevolent green light.

Putting his lance in rest, Tristan spurred his charger directly at the dragon. The great steed leapt into battle with a good will, for he was as courageous as his master. Just as Tristan's lance struck the side of the dragon and was shattered into splinters, the monster let out a gout of flame from its mouth. Tristan held off the flames from his own body with his shield, but it was not sufficient also to protect his steadfast friend. The horse crumpled to the ground, dead on the instant. Tristan jumped aside as his mount fell, and drew his sword. He darted to and fro, dodging the dragon's teeth and claws and flaming fire and the lashings of its mighty tail, but though he landed many blows, none could pierce the scales of the beast. Then Tristan darted under the dragon's body and stabbed upwards. His blade found a soft, unprotected space in the dragon's breast, and his blade went straight into the beast's heart. With a deafening scream and a last burst of flame, the dragon coiled in its death throes. It shuddered a final time and was still.

Then Tristan took his sword and cut out the dragon's tongue. He put it inside his armor next to his skin for safekeeping but did not think about the poisonous venom that was in it. Tristan staggered and fell, where he lay like one dead.

While Tristan was fighting the dragon, the five men he had passed on the road stopped at a tavern where they talked among themselves of the knight who had gone where they dared not, and wondered how he had fared. The one who had spoken to Tristan was the Seneschal of Ireland, and a right coward, but he was the leader of that little band. He said to his fellows, "Let us go and see what became of that knight we met on the road. Mayhap we will find something to our own advantage."

So the Seneschal and his companions went back to the dragon's lair, and when they arrived they saw that the beast lay dead and Tristan

also slain beside it, or so they thought. So the Seneschal took his sword and cut off the dragon's head, thinking that he would thus have the Lady Iseult for his prize. When the Seneschal showed the head to the king, the king wondered how a man of so little prowess could have slain such a great beast, but he had no choice but to keep his word, and so said that the fair Iseult should wed the Seneschal, but only after the court had judged the rightness of his claim.

Iseult herself was shamed that she would be made to marry a man of little courage and conniving ways, so she called for her palfrey and set out for the dragon's lair, along with her faithful squire, Perinis, and Brangien, her maid. At the beast's den they found the headless body of the dragon and the burned body of a horse, but looking upon its saddle and arms knew that the steed was not that of the Seneschal. Casting about them, they soon chanced upon Tristan, still lying as though dead on the grass. They put Tristan onto Perinis's horse and brought him back to the castle, where Iseult gave him into the care of her mother. When her servants removed Tristan's armor, they found the dragon's tongue, and the queen knew that the venom of it was the cause of Tristan's swoon. She gave him a physic for it, and soon he came to himself.

The queen told Tristan of the Seneschal's deed, and of Iseult's horror at being promised to a knave and a coward. Tristan vowed that he would defend his own honor, and that of Iseult, if the queen could but heal him of his hurts. The queen agreed, gladly, then went to tell her daughter. Iseult wished to know more of this strange knight, so she went to where his arms had been placed. She drew the sword out of its sheath, and there she saw the notch in the blade, which exactly fitted the bit of steel she had taken from the head of Morholt. At this, she fell into a rage, and sword in hand she strode into the chamber where Tristan lay, still weak from the dragon's venom. Iseult held the sword at his breast saying, "I know who you are. You are Tristan of Lyonesse, who slew the knight Morholt, my uncle and a good man. Tell me why I should not now have my vengeance on you."

"Lady," said Tristan, "kill me if you must, for I owe you my life twice over. I was the harper you saved, who came to Ireland in a little boat and grievously wounded, and now a you have saved me from the dragon's venom. But before you avenge your uncle I ask you: did I not slay Morholt in fair combat? Did he not act as champion for Ireland as I did for Cornwall? And did I not also slay the dragon for you? So take then my life, for it is yours, but do this knowing what it is you do, and who it is you slay."

Iseult held the sword still at his breast, but now she was troubled in

her heart. She said, "Why then would you come here, since you have set yourself at enmity with Ireland? Why then would you take me unwilling to a far country where I am a stranger, but to punish me and my father and my people?"

Then Tristan told to her the story of the birds and the fair golden hair, and that it was for this that he came to Ireland, to find such a lady, although he did not then say who had sent him or why. And Iseult found herself well answered. She lowered the sword, and there made peace with Tristan.

When the day came for the Seneschal to prove his claim, the king found his hall filled not only with his own courtiers but with a hundred strange knights, all dressed in fine raiment and girt with good swords, for Iseult had sent Perinis to Tristan's ship to give his companions word that they were to array themselves as befit their station and come to the court at the appointed time. There in front of the court, the Seneschal told a tale of how he had slain the dragon, and produced its head as evidence of his prowess and victory. Then the king said, "Is there anyone who would gainsay the claim of the Seneschal?"

For a long moment there was silence in the hall. Then Iseult stepped forward and said, "Noble father, there is one knight here who would gainsay him, and he is none other than the knight who did slay the dragon indeed. But before he comes before you to make his claim, I first ask that you pardon any wrongs he may have done you in the past, whatever they may be."

The king readily agreed. Then Iseult brought Tristan into the hall, and when she did so, the hundred strange knights bowed to him, so that all might know that this was their lord. Some of the Irish knights recognized him, saying that this was none other than the knight who had slain Morholt. A few drew their swords and would have done battle right then and there, but Iseult cried out, "My lord king! You have given your word to pardon this man all his wrongs. Make good now on your promise."

The king ordered his knights to sheathe their swords, and he said that all was forgiven of Tristan, for the king was a man of his word. Then he said to Tristan, "What say you of the Seneschal's claim, and of the reason for your presence here in our kingdom? "

"My lords," said Tristan, "it is true that I slew Morholt. But you fail in courtesy when you think to punish me for that deed: I did battle with him, but only after Morholt came to Cornwall and threw down his challenge at your behest. I stand before you now having repaid the debt of that loss, for truly it is I who slew the dragon. This I did not for myself, but on behalf of King Mark of Cornwall, that he

might wed the fair Iseult and by this union thus put an end to all grievances between our two countries. I and the hundred Cornish knights who stand here do swear solemnly that this is our errand, and that we will ever be faithful to Iseult as our lady queen."

Then the king and the lords of Ireland said that they were well answered. And so the king received of Tristan his vow to convey Iseult safely to the land of Cornwall and to King Mark. When all had been made ready, Tristan and his companions took ship for Tintagel, with the Lady Iseult and her maid and squire among them as honored guests, and other servants to do for the lady as she might require.

Now, before Iseult had taken ship for Cornwall, her mother prepared a love philtre, put it in a stoppered flask, and gave it into the keeping of Brangien, telling her to pour it out for Iseult and Mark on their wedding night as though she were giving them a drink of wine, but to keep the flask safely hidden until then, for the philtre had the power to make the two who drank of it love one another with the deepest of loves for the rest of their days. Brangien vowed that she would do as the queen commanded, and so hid the flask among the goods taken into the ship.

The ship sailed towards Cornwall with fair winds, but soon they found themselves becalmed near a little island. The sailors bent themselves to the oars and beached the ship, thinking that all might take their ease on land while they awaited a freshening breeze. All disembarked then, save the Lady Iseult, who stayed on board, sorrowing that she must go to a strange country to be wed to a man she did not know.

Tristan went back to the ship to see what he might do to ease Iseult's grief. The day was hot, and Tristan asked whether the lady might like somewhat to drink. She said she did, so the little serving-girl who was with Iseult went below to see whether she might find some refreshment. Looking about through the hold, the girl found the flask that the queen had prepared. Thinking that the flask held cool wine, she brought it above to her lady, with two beakers, and poured it out for them. Tristan toasted the lady's health, and then they both drank.

It was then that Brangien returned to the ship and saw them both standing there, gazing at one another transfixed. Also she saw the empty flask nearby and knew that the pair had drunk the love-philtre. "Alas!" she cried. "That was no common wine you have drunk, but death."

Tristan knew that Brangien spoke true, for he knew that he loved Iseult more than his own life itself, and that thereby he had betrayed

his king, whom he loved like a father. Iseult for her part found her sorrow abated. Within her she felt only love for the handsome knight of Lyonesse, and her hatred of him and of her betrothed husband banished entire. And there on the deck of the ship Tristan and Iseult pledged their love to one another, but Brangien despaired. Telling her friends that their love was but the effect of the potion brewed by Iseult's mother was of no avail: the lady and the knight were in the thrall of love, and vassals of that love they would remain, whether they willed it or not.

When they arrived at Tintagel, King Mark came out to greet Iseult with great courtesy. He welcomed her joyfully to his court, and thanked Tristan and his knights for their courage and steadfastness. Some days later, the wedding of Iseult and Mark took place with great ceremony in the castle chapel. But on the wedding night, Brangien it was who shared Mark's bed, taking the place of her mistress in the dark without Mark's knowledge, for Brangien felt the weight of guilt for Tristan and Iseult having drunk the philtre, and also she did not want to see such a pure love sullied.

Although Iseult was well loved by Mark and by all his court, and although she lacked for nothing in raiment or food or occupation befitting a lady, she could not be happy, for the one she truly loved she could never have. Daily she loved Tristan with all her soul, and daily she sorrowed and feared over it, for she might show that love to no one without imperiling both herself and her beloved. But always Iseult showed her love for Tristan, in glances or in small signs of friendship, nor could he stay his own gestures of love towards her, although these were but moments quickly stolen with the constant hope that they had not been noticed.

The fears of Tristan and his lady were well founded, for the four envious nobles who had first demanded that Mark be wed saw the signs of love between the pair. This they thought to use against Tristan and Mark alike, by poisoning the king's love for his queen and turning him against the nephew he cherished so dearly. The four therefore begged an audience of the king, and told him that Tristan loved the Lady Iseult, and that he had betrayed the trust of his liege lord thereby. Mark refused to hear them, saying that he would yet trust Tristan, who had been ever loyal and who had defended him and the realm of Cornwall with his body against both the knight Morholt and a dragon.

Despite Mark's stout defense of Tristan, an evil seed of doubt had been planted in the breast of the king, and he began to watch Tristan to see whether there were any signs of the love of which he had been told. Mark tired of this ere long, for although he saw the affection between the pair he could find no reason to think theirs

was anything but a fond friendship, nor that they had betrayed him in any wise. Nevertheless, the doubt remained, until finally the king could bear it no longer. He called Tristan to himself and told him of the rumors spread by the nobles. "I do not think you have betrayed me," Mark said to Tristan, "but nevertheless I think it best that you remove yourself from my court, both for the ease of my own mind and to stay the foul gossip against your honor and that of my queen."

Tristan sorrowed to hear these words, but he obeyed his lord without protest. Taking only his squire Gorvenal with him, he left the castle Tintagel that very day. He could not bring himself to go far: finding lodgings for himself and Gorvenal in Tintagel town, he there bided his time in hopes that Mark would relent and take him back into his service. And there he found a trial sorer than anything he had endured, more painful even than his combat with Morholt, and more trying to his courage even than his battle with the dragon, for he might not catch even a glimpse of the Lady Iseult by day or by night.

Iseult suffered grievously also. For it was her part to feign love for King Mark, and to lie by his side each night as his wife though she loved another. Iseult no longer had even the quick stolen glances nor the courtly speech she had exchanged with Tristan when she could, and so she pined for him and began to waste away.

Brangien saw this, and knew that if Iseult could not see Tristan she would die. Brangien sought out where Tristan had gone, and found him in his lodgings in the town, where he likewise had begun to wither. Brangien told Tristan to come to the castle orchard and stand under a certain pine, where he should throw chips of wood into the spring that ran past the pine when he wished to see Iseult, for the stream ran through the women's quarters in the castle. This Tristan did, and betimes he and Iseult would meet in the orchard, then part and return to their own abodes before they could be discovered. And in this wise did the health and joy of both return.

King Mark was well pleased that his queen had regained her former vigor, though little did he know the cause thereof. The four evil lords saw this also, and their cunning hearts suspected the reason. Therefore they sent for a magician they knew, to seek his help in discovering how it was that Iseult and Tristan met one another still. The magician cast a spell and saw thereby how Tristan and Iseult were meeting in the orchard. The evil lords brought the magician back to the castle, where he told King Mark that he was yet betrayed by the lovers, and how to lie in wait for them so as to catch them in their disgrace.

That night, King Mark went into the orchard taking with him his bow and also the magician, to see the truth of his claim. Mark hid himself in the pine tree where the spring was, and bade the magician hide himself also. Mark saw Tristan put the chips of wood into the spring as was his wont, and soon the Lady Iseult came through the trees towards him. Mark nocked an arrow to the string, thinking to slay Tristan at the first sign of betrayal. Tristan heard the sound and knew they were being watched. But he could neither stir nor cry out to the Lady Iseult for fear that the bowman might slay her.

Even in the gloom, Iseult could see Tristan's distress in the way he stood. She looked about her, thinking also that mayhap they had been discovered. When saw the shadow of King Mark in the waters of the spring, she knew what she must do, and could only hope that Tristan would understand her design.

"O Sir Tristan," she said, "why have you called me hither? It is not meet that you should do this, as well you know. You have asked many times before and I have never answered, but I am come tonight in the hopes that your pleas will cease thereafter. "

"My lady," said Tristan, "it is true that I have asked many times, but I have done so only to discover whether you know why it is King Mark has turned himself against me, for I know of no fault I have committed that might anger him so. I come to beg your aid, for surely he will listen to his queen."

Iseult replied, "Do you not know that the king thinks you have betrayed him with me? And I who have only ever loved he who first pledged love to men. Were the king to know of my coming to you, both our lives would be forfeit."

Then Iseult turned and began to walk back to the castle.

"Lady!" cried Tristan, "In God's name, I beg you: plead to the king for me, for I have done him no wrong."

Iseult turned and said, "The Lord God knows you to be innocent, even if the king does not. Be content therefore."

Then she passed among the trees and out of sight. Mark watched her go, and saw that Tristan made no move to follow, but turned about and left the orchard. The magician saw this also, and so he fled Cornwall lest the king think he had played him false and so kill him. But Mark returned to the castle, and on the morrow sent word that he had pardoned Tristan, saying that he knew the rumors were lies, and that Tristan was once more welcome at court.

The four envious nobles saw this and their hatred of Tristan redoubled. Again they tried to poison the mind of the king, but he would not hear them. Again and again they approached Mark with

their complaints, and finally the king's resolve failed. He agreed to allow the magician another trial. This time, the magician told Mark to send Tristan on an errand far from Tintagel, for surely Tristan would not be able to resist speaking to the queen before he left, and this would be evidence of the love he bore for her. Mark ordered it done as the magician said.

Tristan arose before dawn to take the message. The whole castle seemed still to be asleep, so Tristan thought it safe to say a farewell to the queen before he left. He went to her chamber, and when he opened the door he saw that a trap had been laid for him: fine flour was scattered on the floor between the door and Iseult's bed, the work of the magician. Thinking to foil the trap, Tristan made a great leap between the door and the bed. But he also had been wounded earlier that day in a boar hunt. Tristan's leap made the wound bleed afresh, and so drops of blood there were scattered in a trail between the door and the queen's bed, but Tristan did not feel it and so noticed it not.

The magician had followed Tristan secretly, and when he saw him go into Iseult's chamber raised the alarm. Mark and the four nobles rushed into the room to find Tristan standing there, the blood from his wound giving sure proof of his guilt. The nobles rushed upon Tristan and took him prisoner, and the queen as well, and Mark said to them, "I see now that your guilt was not a mere rumor. You shall die for this. "

Tristan begged to be allowed to prove his innocence and that of the queen by test of arms, but the king would not hear of it. He locked them in cells in the dungeon, and on the morrow prepared a pyre on which to burn the lovers. When the people of Tintagel found out what the king intended, they cried that he was a false king who burned the accused without even a trial. But the king's heart was now so sorely aggrieved that he would not hear them, and called for Tristan to be taken to his doom.

Now, between the dungeon and the place where Mark had made the pyre there was a chantry standing on the edge of a cliff. As Tristan was taken past the chantry, he begged his guards to be allowed to go within and say a last prayer before he died. "For there is but one door," said Tristan, "and you are armed but I am not; surely I could not leave without your knowing it, nor could I fight my way free of you."

The guards agreed to this request. They cut from Tristan his bonds that he might more easily say his prayers, and let him into the chantry. Tristan made straight for the window behind the altar, for below it was a sheer drop onto the beach below, and he thought to

take his own life thus rather than be burned as a common criminal. The young knight burst through the window and plummeted towards the earth, but as he did so the wind caught his cloak and slowed his fall so that he was neither killed nor badly hurt. There he found Gorvenal waiting for him with a horse, for the squire had seen Tristan go into the chantry, and reading what was in his friend's mind had thought to help him escape. And so together Tristan and Gorvenal went to a place where they might lie hidden while they waited for news of what had befallen Iseult.

When Mark heard that Tristan had escaped, his wrath redoubled. He ordered Iseult brought forth straight away and burned. Now, a company of lepers had come to see the burning, and no sooner had Iseult been brought before the king than the leader of them, a man called Ivan, shouted out, "My lord, if you would punish the queen more surely, send her to live with us. By fire she dies but once, but in our company her torment will be the longer." For Ivan was a cruel man, and jealous of the beautiful queen, and he hoped to make her his own slave.

Mark thought on this for a moment, and then agreed to Ivan's plan. He ordered the queen handed over to the lepers, who bore her away with them. Soon enough, the gang of lepers approached the place where Tristan and Gorvenal lay hid. Seeing his beloved so roughly handled, Tristan sprang into the road and cried out to them to stop. Goaded by Ivan, the lepers took up their staves and crutches and advanced on Tristan, thinking to kill him where he stood. And they would have succeeded had Tristan been alone, for although he could have killed them all in a trice even without his sword, he could not bring himself to strike such pitiable creatures even with his fists.

Gorvenal it was who came to the rescue, swinging a stout branch of oak and buffeting away the lepers. Those he did not strike took flight, but Gorvenal did not pursue them. Rather he gathered to him Tristan and Iseult and after loosing her bonds together they went into the woods of Morois. Gorvenal gave to Tristan a bow and some arrows, and also his sword, then bade the lovers farewell, saying that he would tell no man where they were but would come to the woods from time to time to see how they fared.

And so Tristan and Iseult lived in the woods, making rude huts for their shelter and eating such food as the forest provided. Although they soon became gaunt with hunger and their clothes mere tatters, yet the lovers were content, for they were together and there was none to gainsay them. In such bliss as this they lived, until one day a woodsman by chance found Tristan and his lady asleep inside their hut, with Tristan's naked sword between them. The woodsman

rode at once to King Mark and told him where Tristan and the queen might be found, for the king had offered a rich reward to the one who would bring him this news.

Mark then went into the forest with the woodsman, and when they were near the place where Tristan and Iseult lay, the king bade the woodsman begone and went on alone. Mark drew his sword, thinking to slay the lovers. But when Mark saw them, he wondered at their beauty despite their tattered clothes and gaunt faces. Also he saw that they slept with a naked blade between them, and thus he knew that their love had been chaste all along. Mark sheathed his sword, then stepped quietly up to the hut where he gently took Tristan's blade from between the knight and the queen and left his own in its stead. He took a royal ring from his finger, and placed it on the hand of the queen. Mark then withdrew as silently as he had come, and returned to Tintagel.

So deep was her sleep that Iseult did not wake, but she dreamed that Mark had come to her, and told Tristan of this when she woke. When they saw the ring, and that Tristan's sword was missing and the king's in its place, they knew that Iseult had dreamed true. Fearing the king's wrath, Tristan and Iseult fled farther into the depths of the forest.

Tristan and Iseult took thought together of what they might do, so they sought out the hermit who lived in the forest, and bade him write a letter to the king. In the letter, they said that Tristan would bring Iseult to the court if they but had safe conduct, and that there he would offer battle for his honor and for that of Iseult. And if he were defeated, then the king might burn him, but if he were victorious, the king must take back Iseult and either take Tristan back into service, or else he would depart for a far country and serve another king there. If Mark made no answer, Tristan would bring her back to Ireland where she might live in honor among her own people.

Mark read Tristan's terms to his nobles, who counselled the king to take back Iseult and let Tristan go away to a far country. Then King Mark called out, "Is any here who accuses Sir Tristan?"

And there was silence, for none of the nobles wished to meet Tristan in the lists.

Mark therefore sent word that Iseult would be taken back but that Tristan must leave Cornwall forever, and that in three days he would meet them at the ford of a certain river for Iseult to be returned to him. Knowing that they must soon part, Iseult gave to Tristan her ring as a token, saying that if ever he had need of her he should send the ring and she would do as he asked. Tristan for his

part gave Iseult his hunting-hound to be her companion and a reminder of his love for her.

On the appointed day, Tristan led Iseult to the ford, and she was wearing fresh raiment bought for her by the hermit that she might not go before the king and his nobles clad as a beggar. There Tristan stood and said, "Behold, I bring to you Iseult, as I promised. I ask once more whether any man will give battle that I may prove my honor."

And none answered him.

Then Tristan and Iseult made their farewells. Iseult went back to the castle with the king, and Tristan made ready to leave Cornwall. But before he went, he hid in the hut of a woodsman who had befriended them betimes, to see whether Iseult was treated well at the court.

But the evil nobles still were unsatisfied with Tristan's disgrace. They counselled the king to put the queen through an ordeal by iron, to prove her innocence. This filled Mark with rage, and he banished them from the kingdom. When he returned to his chamber, he found Iseult there. She asked him, "Why is my lord so angered?"

Then Mark told her what the nobles had demanded, and said, "But you need not fear, for I have rid us of them, and I know you to be faithful."

But Iseult replied, "Let me undergo that ordeal, that my name be cleared for ever, and let your banished nobles also attend that they might see this with their own eyes. But invite King Arthur and his nobles to the trial also, for the lords of Cornwall wish me ill, but Arthur's witness others will believe."

Iseult therefore sent her squire Perinis to Tristan secretly, telling him to disguise himself as a poor pilgrim, that he might witness the trial in secret and safely.

On the appointed day, King Mark and the lords of Cornwall met with King Arthur and his nobles in a field where the trial was to take place. Tristan came also, disguised as a pilgrim, that he might see what befell. A brazier had been set there, full of hot coals, and a bar of iron placed within, for Iseult was to take the hot iron in her bare hands, and if she were innocent, God would protect her and she would not be harmed. Iseult came forward, dressed simply in a shift of white. After saying a prayer with the priest, she swore an oath that no man save her own rightful husband had ever held her in his arms. Then she went to the brazier and took from it the bar of iron in her bare hands. She walked nine steps with it, then cast it from her. She turned to Mark and the assembled lords and showed them her hands and arms, and lo, they remained fresh and

unmarked. All praised God and vowed that no longer would Iseult's honor be doubted.

Tristan also witnessed the trial, and when he saw that Iseult's honor had been vindicated, he knew it was time for him to leave Cornwall. Therefore he took up his arms and went with Gorvenal from kingdom to kingdom, serving each lord but a little while, for his heart could never be at rest without Iseult. For two years he lived thus, until he came to Brittany, where he helped Hoel, the duke of that land, rid himself of an evil baron who was laying the country waste. There Tristan tarried a while, and became boon companions with Hoel's son, Kaherdin. After a time, Kaherdin said to his father, "Tristan is a knight like none other, and would make a fine husband for my sister. I beg leave to offer her to him."

Hoel agreed, so Kaherdin went to Tristan and said that his sister, who also was named Iseult, would be his wife, were Tristan willing, and Tristan said he was. But on the wedding night, as Tristan was undressing, the ring that Iseult, queen of Cornwall, had given him fell out of the sleeve where he always kept it, and he regretted having wed.

In Cornwall, Iseult for her part pined for Tristan, for she knew he had gone far away, and never did he once send word to her of how he fared. She knew nothing of how the years had passed for him until one day a visiting nobleman named Kariado came to her and tried to woo her. She spurned him, and so he said, "Well might you pine for your fair knight, for Tristan is wed to Iseult of Brittany, the daughter of a duke."

Then Kariado departed, never to return, but Iseult's sorrow grew the greater.

Now, although Tristan had wed another, his thought ever was for Iseult of Cornwall alone. So one day he disguised himself by throwing beggar's rags over his own clothing, then left Hoel's castle secretly and sought out a ship that might take him to Cornwall. After many days and nights at sea, the ship finally put in at Tintagel harbor, where Tristan roamed about as a beggar, his ear ever open for news of the Lady Iseult. Finally he heard that she was indeed at Tintagel castle, as was the king and all his court. Then Tristan devised a plan by which he might see the queen without being discovered. Changing clothes with a rough fisherman, Tristan cut his long hair and shaved it down nearly to his scalp. Then he brewed a potion that would darken his skin, and he cut a club of oak from a nearby tree. Thus disguised, he went to the castle gate and feigned that he was a fool come to entertain the king and the lords of the castle.

Tristan pranced and prattled before the court, and all laughed heartily and well, all but for Iseult, for the fool listed to them the deeds that Tristan had done, claiming them for himself, and while all thought him merely a raving madman, Iseult was wounded to the core, for she thought the fool was mocking the man she loved most. After the feast, Tristan stayed in the hall, alone, until Brangien chanced to pass through, along with the Lady Iseult. Tristan went to them, and said things that were known only to himself and to Iseult, and finally she knew him to be her beloved. For three days did Tristan hop about and ape the courtiers in the guise of the fool, and for three nights did he go secretly to the Lady Iseult. But after that time Tristan knew he must leave, for the courtiers were becoming suspicious of the attentions paid between the lady and the fool .

And so Tristan returned to Brittany, where he served well Duke Hoel, until one day he was ambushed by an enemy and his side pierced by a poisoned lance. Tristan knew that this was surely the death of him, so he called Kaherdin to himself and poured out all the story of his love for Iseult of Cornwall, thinking that none could hear him. Except Iseult that was his wife did hear, and she grew angry, and plotted her vengeance against Tristan.

At Tristan's behest, Kaherdin took the ring Iseult had given him to Cornwall, to bid the Lady Iseult to come to Brittany to say a last farewell to Tristan. Kaherdin was to take with him two sails: one white, if Iseult were with him, and one black, if she were not. Daily would Tristan watch the horizon, and would know thereby whether his beloved were come to him. When Iseult heard Kaherdin's tale, she went with him gladly, but rough seas and a violent storm pushed their ship off their course, and by the time they were come near to the harbor, white sail aloft, Tristan was too weak to look out the window any longer. It was then that Iseult of Brittany had her revenge, for when Tristan asked whether there was any news of Kaherdin's return, she said there was. And when Tristan asked after the color of the sail, she said, "Why, my lord, it is black as night."

At this, Tristan's heart broke indeed, and breathing the name of his beloved, he died. When the ship came into harbor, they found the whole city in mourning. Iseult asked one of the nobles who had come to greet the ship what was the cause of their sorrow, and he said, "Lady, we mourn for the greatest knight in all the world. Tristan of Lyonesse is dead."

Then Iseult went up to the castle, and came into the chamber of Tristan, where the other Iseult was weeping over his dead body, and with remorse for her deed. "Lady," said Iseult of Cornwall, "do you step aside, for ever have I loved him, longer even than you."

Iseult of Brittany stood aside while Iseult of Cornwall kissed Tristan on the eyes and the brow, and then on the lips. Then she laid herself down beside her beloved and also breathed her last. Hearing of the deaths of Tristan and Iseult, Mark caused fine coffins to be made for them. He came to Brittany, and bore their bodies back to Cornwall, where he had them entombed in that very chantry from which Tristan had made his leap. One night a briar grew from Tristan's tomb, and wound its way across the chantry until it came to rest on the tomb of Iseult. And those who tended the chantry cut the briar back, but every night it grew back. When Mark was told of this, he forbade the caretakers to cut the briar any more.

And thus ends the tale of the love between Tristan and Iseult.

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Pronunciation Guide

Modern Celtic languages fall into two broad groups: Brythonic Gaelic (also known as P-Celtic) and Goedelic Gaelic (also known as Q-Celtic). The Brythonic branch includes Breton, Welsh, and Cornish. Of these, only Breton and Welsh continue to have native speakers. Cornish became extinct as a first language in the eighteenth century, but was revived in the early twentieth. The Goedelic branch includes Manx and the various dialects of Irish and Scottish Gaelic. The latter two continue to be a first language for a small percentage of the populations in those countries. The last native speaker of Manx died in 1974, but Manx has continued to be spoken as a second language on the Isle of Man.

The following standards will be used for sounds in the pronunciation guide:

ai = as in fair

ay = as in shy

ah = as in far

ee = as in feet

eh = as in yet

ih = as in it

oh = as in no

oo = as in food

ow = as in down

oy = as in boy

uh = as in under

g = as in good, never as in giant

ch = ch as in loch

tch = ch as in child

th = voiceless th as in thin

th = voiced th as in they

Irish Names and Words

Foster daughter of Bodb Derg

Scotland

Foster-father of Cuchulainn

Foster-daughter of Bodb Derg and first wife of Lir

Son of Aobh and Lir, twin brother of Fionnula

Second wife of Lir

King of the Tuatha De Danann

Plain between the Liffey and Boyne Rivers in County Wick

eastern Ireland

One of the nobles of Ulster under King Conchobor

Ailbhe (AIL-vyeh):

Alba (AHL-bah):

Amergin (AH-mehr-gin):

Aobh (AIV):

Aodh (AITH)

Aoife (EE-feh):

Bodb Derg (BOHV DAIRG):

Brú na Bóinne (BREE-na BOYNE):

Bricriu (BRIK-ree):

Bricriu (BRIK-roo):

Site of the Boyne Valley Tombs, Bough na Baine (BROO-nah-BOYN):
 Rock of the Seals Carraig na Ron (KAIR-egg nah ROHN):
 Druid of the court of Conchobor Cathbad (CAH-hbahd):
 One of the nobles of Ulster under King Conchobor Conall (KONN-all):
 King of Ulster and foster-father of Cuchulainn Conchobor (KONN-uh-cover):
 Child of Aobh and Lir Conn (KONN):
 Province of central western Ireland Connach t (KON-ahcht):
 Irish Gaelic word for "hound" Cu (KOO):
 "Hound of Culann"; superhuman hero of Ulster Cu Ulinn (KOO-CH UH-lin):
 Smith whose guard dog is destroyed by Cuchulainn Culann (KOO-lown):
 Ancient Celtic deity; one of the Tuatha De Danann Dagda (DAI-ah-doh):
 Bodb Derg
 Sister of Conchobor Deichtine (DAICH -tin-eh):
 Wife of Lairgnen, King of Ireland Deoch (DAI-och):
 Irish warrior and character in the Fenian Cycle Diarmuid (DEE-PR-sud):
 of Diarmuid and Grainne"
 Place in Ireland mentioned in the story of the birth of Cuchulainn (EL-aimon):
 Seat of the court of Conchobor in Ulster Maelsa (KHE-winn MAH-ly-shah):
 "Emain"
 1. One of the nobles of Ulster under King Conchobor Fergus (FAIR-gus):
 2. Son of Bodb Derg and one of the Tuatha De Danann
 Son of Aobh and Lir; twin brother of Conn Fiachra (FEE-ah-ch ra):
 Ancient Irish board game that may have been soidhele (HEE-deh-eh):
 Ancient Irish hero of the Fenian Cycle Cumhaill (FINN MAK KOO-uhl):
 Sister of Conchobor and foster-mother of Cuchulainn (FINN-uh-chaym):
 Daughter of Aobh and Lir; twin sister of Aodh Fionnula (FINN-oo-lah):
 Son of Conchobor Follamain (FALL-uh-vin):
 Irish Gaelic word for "dog" Gadhar (GAY-ar):
 Woman betrothed to Finn mac Cumhaill in the Fenian Cycle "The Pursuit"
 of Diarmuid and Grainne"
 Name of the stronghold of Amergin and Finnchaem of Ulster Imrish (IM-rih):
 Island off the coast of County Mayo, western Ireland Inis Gluaire
 (IN-ish GLOO-air-eh):
 Irish place name Irrus Domnann (IHR-us DOV-nown):
 One of the nobles of Ulster under King Conchobor Lægire (LAY-gir-eh):
 A king of Ireland Lairgnen (LAIRG-nen):
 One of the Tuatha De Danann; originally Lir may have been Lir (LEER):
 god
 "Lake of the Oaks": lake in County Wick Loch Dair (LOCH DAIR-uh-vrach):
 Ancient Celtic deity; probably a solar god, associated with warriors Lug (LOOG):
 An avatar of Lug Lug mac Ethnenn (LOOG mak EH-hnen):
 Leader of a group that invaded Ireland in the pseudo-history "The Book of the Takings of Ireland"
 "Book of the Takings of Ireland"

the death of Goleuddydd
 One of the three fastest men in Britain **Dirig Ail Cyndar** (DIRICH AIL KIB-dahr):
 Place name in the Mabinogion **Dyfed** (DUH-ved):
 Place in Ireland mentioned in the Mabinogion **Ess Mair Ogífel** (ESS-geyer OHR-vell):
 Place in Wales mentioned in the Mabinogion **Glym Ystun** (GLINN ISS-tin):
 Mother of Culhwch **Goleuddydd** (go-LAI-th ith):
 Son of Custennin **Goreu** (GOHR-ai):
 Welsh place name; hill near Gorsedd Ahrherfyn **Gloar-seth AHR-bairth**):
 One of the sons of Grofyne Gwarythw Echlir **GRIG-in GOOR-ich AIR-eyent**)
 One of Gwalchmai of King Wynd **GWAHLCH-meye mahb GOO-yahr**):
 Rival of Pwyll for the hand of Rhiannon **Gwawl** (GOO-owl):
 Place name in the Mabinogion; **Gwent** **GWAENTYSS GOVW**
 Liant
 Childhood name of Pryderi, Wall of Eryll **GOOR-heer MAH-THTL Afster**):
 son of Teyrnion
 Character in the story of Culhwch and Olwen **Gwyn** (GWIN):
 Gwyn **GOOR-heer GOO-stahd ee-YAI-thoyth**):
 Rival of Arawn for lands in Annwn **Hafgan** (HAHV-gahn):
 River in Wales **Hafren** (HAHV-ren):
 "Old Hyfaidd"; Father of Rhiannon **Hyfaidd Hen** (HUH-veth HEN):
 One of the knights of King Arthur **Kai** (KEYE):
 Father of Branwen and Manawydan; Welsh analogue of the THERER:
 Collection of Welsh myths and legends **Mabinogion** (mah-bi-NOH-gyon):
 One of the knights of King Arthur **Mabon** (MAH-bohn):
 Main character in the third branch of the Mabinogi **Manawydan** **MAH-brohdanf**
 Branwen
 Main character in the fourth branch of the Mabinogi **Math** (MAHTH):
 Father of Math **Mathonwy** (MAHTH-on-wee):
 One of the knights of King Arthur **Menw** (MEN-oo):
 Father of Mabon **Modron** (MOH-drohn):
 Father of Gwyn **Nudd** (NITH):
 Bride of Culhwch and daughter of Ysbaddaden Penrth **Odlwen** (OHL-wen):
 Place in Wales mentioned in the Mabinogion **Ponty Glais** (POHRTY KLEYESS):
 Son of Pwyll and Rhiannon **Pryderi** (prih-DAIR-ee):
 The name of King Arthur's ship **Prydwen** (PRID-wen):
 Lord of Dyfed; friend of Arawn, husband of Rhiannon **Pwyll** (PWOY-ll)
 Pryderi
 Father of Menw **Teirgwaedd** (TAIR-gweyeth):
 Nobleman who **Teyrnion** **TOORCH TROO-with**):
 A king who was changed into a swine **Tegid Trooyth** (TOORCH TROO-with):
 Chief of the **Ysbaddaden Penrth** (ISS-bah-THAH-den pen-KOWR):
 One of the cantrefs mentioned in Ystrad Fynog **YH-strahd TUH-wee**):
 Place in Wales mentioned in the Mabinogi **Ystrad Yw** (uh-STRAHD EE-oo):

Other Names and Words

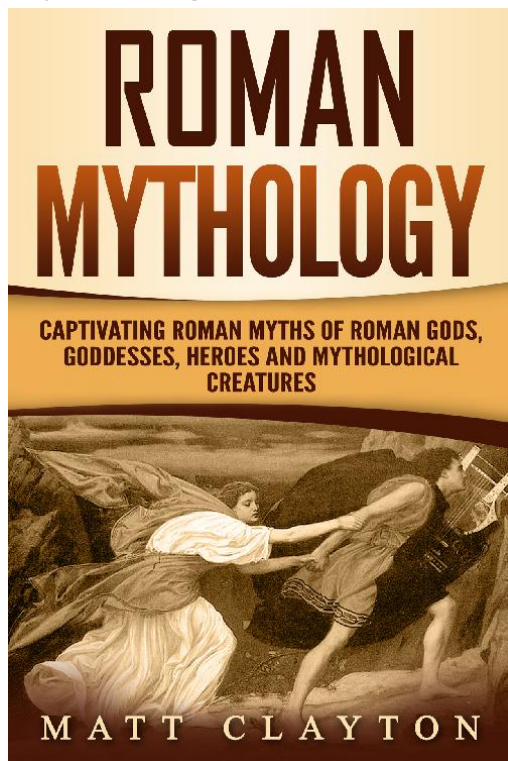
Pronunciation of personal names from “The Drowned City of Ys” and “The Romance of Tristan and Iseult” are mostly given according to Old French standards, except for “Tintagel,” which has a Modern English pronunciation, and “Menez-Hom,” which is Breton .

The pronunciation guide is the same as the one given above, with the exception of the front-rounded u, which does not exist in Irish or English.

ü = front-rounded u as in Modern French cru

Section 5: Roman Mythology

Captivating Roman Myths of Roman Gods, Goddesses, Heroes and Mythological Creatures



Introduction

Most students of mythology will know that the corpus of Roman myth tracks very closely with that of Greece. The Roman pantheon was essentially similar to the Greek, although the names of the gods and goddesses were different: for example, the Greek Zeus is Roman Jupiter or Jove; the Greek Hermes is the Roman Mercury; Aphrodite becomes Venus and Ares Mars in Rome; and the mighty Hera of the Greeks was known as Juno on the other side of the Adriatic.

Roman religion did not start this way, however: the overlay of Greek myth is a later addition, and never supplanted native Roman religion, the beginnings of which were attributed to Numa Pompilius, successor to Romulus and second king of Rome. For example, Janus, the two-headed god of doorways, was a uniquely Roman deity, and his temple in the Roman Forum, supposedly constructed by Numa, was one of the most important. Vesta, goddess of home and hearth, is another good example of this distinction between Greek and Roman practice, even though Vesta did have a Greek analogue in the goddess Hestia. This is because worship of Vesta was central to the Roman state cult through the appointment of virgins from patrician families to serve in the goddess' temple in the Forum in Rome and through the goddess' function as protectress of the Roman people.

Connections between religion and state, and between religion and history, are often worked into the myths themselves, some of which were written at least in part in service to the Roman state. The epic poem *The Aeneid* by the Roman poet Virgil not only provided a pseudo-history for the very earliest days of Rome: it also functioned to legitimate the rule of the Julian emperors, who traced their lineage to Iulus (Ascanius), son of Aeneas, the leader of the Trojans after the fall of Troy. The story of the founding of Rome itself by Romulus and Remus likewise captured the Roman imagination, and was treated as actual historical fact by early historians such as Livy (Titus Livius Patavinus, 64 or 59 BC -12 or 17 AD), and by the Roman people themselves.

This text therefore first presents three of the most important Roman foundational myths: a retelling of the *Aeneid* ; the story of Romulus and Remus; and the story of the rape of Lucretia, an incident that supposedly sparked the revolt against the early Roman monarchy and led to the development of the early Republic, and which may have been based on actual historical persons and events.

Like the Greeks, the Romans also delighted in hero tales. Feats of strength and skill, monsters, magic, divine interventions, and the

overcoming of impossible odds by larger-than-life figures all feature in the second section, which retells stories of Hercules, Atalanta, and Jason. The first of these is a uniquely Roman tale, featuring a side trip Hercules supposedly made to Latium, the region in which Rome was built, while he was busy about his twelve Labors. The stories of Atalanta, a huntress so fleet-footed no man could match her in a race, and of Jason, who with the Argonauts sought the Golden Fleece of Colchis, both figure in Greek myth, but came to be retold by Roman mythographers such as Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 BC- 17/18 AD) and Valerius Flaccus (Gaius Valerius Flaccus, d. 90 AD).

One of the most important repositories of ancient Greco-Roman myth is the *Metamorphoses* by Ovid. A selection of stories from that collection forms the third section of this text. As Ovid states in his introduction, his purpose is to tell stories of change, of shifting shapes, of the ways that contact with the divine alters human experience. He begins his collection with the story of the Creation and the Great Flood, which alter first the entire universe and then the created world with waves of creation, destruction, and re-creation. Other stories involve mortals being changed into other creatures, usually as the result of *hubris* , or excessive pride, which must not go unpunished by the gods.

Stories of tragic love are also an important part of the *Metamorphoses* and, like many other tales in that collection, have had a lasting effect on Western culture. The tale of Orpheus and Eurydice functioned as inspiration for Renaissance composers to experiment with new ways of creating music in a search for what they saw as the lost power of music to work magical effects on the physical world and on human beings, while the story of Pyramus and Thisbe became the basis for Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet." That we today still enjoy not only stories based on those myths, but the myths themselves, is a testament to their enduring ability to illuminate the human experience.

PART I: THREE ROMAN ORIGIN MYTHS

The Wanderings of Aeneas

The Aeneid, an epic poem by the Roman author Virgil (Publius Vergilius Maro, 70 - 19 bc) recounts one of the founding myths of Rome: that the city owed its origins to the arrival of Aeneas, prince of Troy, and other refugees from the Trojan War, who conquered the local people and whose descendants Romulus and Remus eventually founded the city from which sprang the Roman Empire. The myths of Aeneas and the founding of Rome therefore also connected the Julian imperial dynasty to divine origins, because the Julians claimed direct descent from Aeneas through his son, Ascanius, who was also known as Iulus (hence the “Julian” family), while Aeneas himself was supposed to have been the son of the human Anchises and the goddess Venus. Therefore, not only is Virgil’s epic one of the glories of ancient literature, it is also a political document intended to legitimize the rule of the first Roman emperors.

The Aeneid was unfinished at Virgil’s death. The poet had requested that the manuscript be burned, unpublished, but the Emperor Augustus (63 bc-14 ad) ordered two of Virgil’s friends to publish what had been written. They did as they were told, apparently leaving Virgil’s original mostly unedited. The poem as it stands ends very abruptly, with the death of Turnus. It is possible that Virgil intended to write more after that point, but his friends chose not to extend the poem further.

The Flight from Troy

Long have the Muses sung of the strife between the Greeks and Troy, of the battles fought by the great Achilles, of the craft of wily Ulysses. And so also do the Muses sing of the deeds of mighty Aeneas, prince of Troy, who led the remnants of that proud people to safe haven after the fall of their city and began the work that became the glory that was Rome.

For ten whole years did the armies of Agamemnon harry the gates of Troy, seeking to avenge the theft of Helen from the home and hearth of Spartan Menelaus, and for ten whole years did Hector and his brave Trojans keep the Greeks at bay, until the hollow horse of trickster Ulysses, its belly full of waiting Greeks armed for slaughter, was drawn into the city by rejoicing Trojans, thinking it a gift from the gods themselves. Late at night, the horse disgorged its deadly cargo, and Troy was sacked by merciless Greeks tired of endless war.

Aeneas, hero of Troy and son of noble Anchises and the goddess

Venus, lay abed with his household. At first, he did not hear the swelling uproar, for his home was at the edge of the city, away from the level place where the great horse stood. Suddenly Aeneas awoke to find the shade of Hector, the greatest of the Trojan warriors slain by mighty Achilles, at his bedside, saying "Woe, woe to the people of Troy! Our folly has betrayed us and Troy has fallen. Up, Aeneas, gather your household and fly the city, for Troy is lost!"

Aeneas armed himself in haste and ran towards the center of the city, but his valor was to no avail. Already King Priam had been slain and the palace set ablaze. Already had Queen Hecuba and the women of the royal household been taken prisoner. Already were Trojan citizens lying dead where the Greeks had slain them in their flight, and the streets stained crimson with their blood. As Aeneas stood lamenting, his divine mother appeared to him and said, "My son, gather up your household and fly the city! Troy is lost: the gods themselves have turned against her. Take what of her people that remains and lead them to safety."

Aeneas ran back home, where he roused his wife, Creusa, and their little son, Ascanius. He took his aged father on his own back and led his family towards the city gates. But Creusa was lost in the flood of people hastening to escape the burning city, and when Aeneas turned back to find her he was met by her shade, who said, "Seek not for me, Aeneas, for I am lost to you forever. Go instead out of the city. Lead the remnant of Troy to safety. For the gods have declared that it is your fate and theirs to wander the world seeking a new abode. You must find the place in the west, where the River Tiber runs through the fertile plains of Hesperia. There will you find a new kingdom, and a new wife to be your queen."

Weeping for the loss of his beloved Creusa and for the sack of his city, Aeneas turned back to the place where he had left Anchises and Ascanius. He told them what had happened and, gathering to him his countrymen who had managed to escape the marauding Greeks, led them to safety on the slopes of Mount Ida, where they passed the winter. The following spring, Aeneas and the remnant of Troy took ship, leaving behind their homeland forever to seek out the place that Creusa had said would be their new home.

First, they sailed to Thrace, where they thought to establish a new city. But ill omens dogged them, and once again they took ship. They sailed then to Delos, where Aeneas went to the temple of Apollo, to offer sacrifice and seek the wisdom of the oracle there. The oracle told him that he must seek the ancient homeland of his people, where the children of Troy would prosper and the sons of Aeneas rule as kings.

Not knowing which land was meant by the oracle, Aeneas returned to his ship and sought counsel of his aged father. "There is a tale that our people came to Troy from Crete," said Anchises. "That is a noble island, good for living in, and not far to sail. "

And so, the Trojans set sail for Crete. They landed there and began building a city. They tilled the earth and husbanded their herds and flocks, and for a time it appeared that they had found their new home. But soon a pestilence came upon the people, and a murrain upon their cattle and sheep, and their crops failed.

"This is the judgement of the gods," Anchises said to Aeneas. "We read the oracle wrongly; Crete is not to be our home. Go back to Delos tomorrow and ask what was meant."

But that night the Trojan gods appeared to Aeneas in a dream, saying, "The place you must go is in the west. It is called Hesperia by the Greeks, but Italy by the people who live there. Your ancestor Dardanus was born there; that is the homeland you seek. By Jupiter's own command is Crete denied you."

Once again Aeneas and his people set sail, this time going westward as the gods had commanded. Contrary winds averted them from their course, and weary from struggling with rope and tiller they put in at an unknown island. Beaching their ships, the Trojans explored the meadows that lay inland, and found that they were in a rich place with many cattle and sheep. Aeneas and his people slaughtered many of the beasts and roasted them, but before they could eat their meal the Trojans were set upon by a foul flock of harpies, creatures with the heads and breasts of women but the wings and talons of birds. The harpies darted here and there, seizing the meat in their talons and making off with it, shrieking all the while.

The Trojans made for themselves another meal, but this time had to hand their bright swords, for they suspected the harpies would return. The harpies returned indeed, lured by the smell of the roasting meat. But the Trojans were ready for them: they slashed at the harpies with their swords, and while they were unable to harm so much as a feather on the vile creatures, they did keep them from snatching away any more food. Seeing that their efforts were futile, the harpies flew away, but not before their leader prophesied that the Trojans would indeed find a new home in Hesperia, but that first they would suffer famine themselves.

The Trojans sailed next to Epirus, where they were made welcome indeed by Helenus, a Trojan who had escaped the destruction of the city and become king of Epirus. Aeneas and his companions rejoiced

to see him well and strong, and to find that Andromache, widow of noble Hector, also had escaped the slaughter, and was now the wife of Helenus.

After resting a while in Epirus, Aeneas and the Trojans set sail again, heading ever westward toward Italy. They paused in their journey on the island of Sicily, where they rescued a companion of Ulysses who had been left behind by mistake when the Ithacans had fled the cyclops Polyphemus and his brothers. The Trojans escaped that fatal place without incident and sailing to the opposite end of the island put in at Drepanium. Their sojourn in Drepanium was not without sorrow, however, for there the aged Anchises died. Aeneas and his companions celebrated Anchises' funeral with games and sacrifices, as was meet, and then resumed their journey .

At first the Trojans had a fair wind. The ships leapt lightly from wave to wave, the sails taut and full with the blowing breeze. Juno looked down from Olympus and saw the Trojans were nearing safe harbor in the place that had been promised them, and she was displeased. Juno had no love for the Trojans, for Paris had spurned her as the most beautiful goddess, choosing Venus instead, but worse still she knew that Aeneas was destined to found a city greater even than Carthage, where Juno was held in highest esteem, and which therefore had her favor. Calling to the wind-god Aeolus, Juno commanded that he send winds to blow up a tempest that would smash the ships of the Trojans and keep them forever from the shores of Italy. Aeolus did as Juno commanded, and soon Aeneas and his companions found themselves tossed in a storm that they feared would sink all their ships.

As the winds howled and the waves heaved the Trojan ships back and forth, Neptune, the god of the sea, looked up and saw that someone had called down a tempest upon his kingdom, and he knew that the Trojans were in mortal peril. Now, the Trojans had ever worshiped Neptune with much honor, and Aeneas was among the favorites of that god. He calmed the waters, and commanded Aeolus to harness the winds. But the work of Juno had been done, if only for a time: Aeneas and his companions had been driven by the storm even to the coast of Africa, where they came to harbor in no other city but Carthage itself.

The Sojourn at Carthage

There they were met by Dido, the beautiful queen of Carthage, who commanded that the Trojans be made welcome and given all that was needful. Dido invited Aeneas to come to her palace, where he was given a chamber to rest in, and water to bathe in, and fresh raiment.

After a suitable time, Dido sent a servant to bring Aeneas to a place where a meal had been set ready. Aeneas strode into the hall, tall and strong and refreshed. Dido looked upon him and knew him for a champion at least, and likely the child of a god. Her heart stirred within her, even though she had forsworn marriage after the murder of her lover, Sychaeus, but outwardly she maintained a steady calm and dignity befitting a queen.

“Be seated,” she said to Aeneas, showing him a place at table. “Be welcome, and perhaps while we eat and drink you might tell me your tale.”

“I thank you for your hospitality, O Queen,” said Aeneas, “and for your aid given to my people, the poor remnant of Troy.”

Then Aeneas took his place at table, and while he dined with Queen Dido, he told her of the capture of Helen, of the long war with the Greeks, and of the fall of the city. He told her of the wanderings of the Trojans thereafter, and of how they came to Carthage. And he told her of the prophecy, that he must go to Italy to found a new city on the banks of the River Tiber, and that that was where he and his people were bound .

Dido listened carefully and well to all that Aeneas said, and found herself entranced with the brave hero who had led his people through so many hardships. She then began to think how she might divert him from his course and persuade him to stay with her in Carthage to rule at her side. Aeneas for his part welcomed this respite from his trials, for to be in a beautiful palace with cool fountains, and fine food and drink, and peace, was more than pleasant, and to hold converse with a beautiful, intelligent woman every day a balm to his weary heart.

Dido and Aeneas spent many happy days together within her palace, and without the Trojan people accepted with gratitude the hospitality of the Carthaginians. The longer Aeneas tarried in Carthage, the more loving he felt towards Queen Dido, and she also found she had lost her heart to him. The prophecy receded from Aeneas’ mind, and as Dido had done on the day of their first meeting, Aeneas also began to think how he and his people might make their home here in this fair and prosperous city on the shores of the Middle Sea, and how he might take to himself Dido as his wife.

From her place in the heavens, Juno saw that Aeneas’ heart had been captured by the strength and beauty of Dido, and she rejoiced, for surely this meant that a rival of her favored city of Carthage would never be built. Venus, meanwhile, was glad that her son had found a haven where he might live the rest of his days in safety. But mighty

Jupiter looked upon the dalliance of Aeneas, and was angered. He summoned to him winged Mercury, saying, "Bring you this message to the Prince of Troy: Have you forgotten the will of the gods? Have you forgotten the patrimony due your son Ascanius, and his heirs after him, to rule the greatest city of all? Go, therefore, and take ship once again for Italy, and to the place within it called Latium. Go, for it is the command of Jupiter himself, the king of all the gods!"

Mercury did the bidding of Jupiter. He went down to Carthage, where he found Aeneas hard at work, assisting Dido with the building of new fortifications. Mercury delivered Jupiter's message, and Aeneas found suddenly that he had no more desire to spend his days in Carthage: he knew that his destiny lay elsewhere, and that he must obey the gods. But Aeneas also knew that Dido loved him well and would be heartbroken when he left her side. He therefore assembled to him all the Trojan remnant in secret, and told them to quietly prepare for departure, while he for his part looked for a way to tell the queen that he must go. Dido soon perceived the change in Aeneas and discovered that he purposed to leave Carthage forever. She called him before her, but no matter her demands or entreaties, she could not stay him, and when he stood firm before her, she uttered a curse of enmity to be always between Carthage and the new city Aeneas would found in Italy.

So, it was that one morning that Queen Dido sorrowed from the tops of the cliffs overlooking the ocean, watching the Trojan sails billowing in the wind as Aeneas and his people took ship once again for the place the oracle had told them to seek. Dido could not bear the pain of her loss, and so commanded a funeral pyre be prepared. She took up a sword and, climbing to the top of the pyre, plunged the sword into her own breast, and died .

The Burning of the Trojan Ships

For a time, the Trojans sailed onward with a fair wind, but soon the breeze shifted and they could make no headway. Palinurus the helmsman gave orders for the sails to be furled, and the Trojans set their backs to the oars. As they rowed steadily on, they saw the island of Sicily rising before them on the horizon.

"We will make landfall there," said Aeneas. "We know that in Drepanium we will receive a good welcome, and there we can pay our respects to the grave of Anchises."

The Trojans did as Aeneas said, and at the harbor they were met by King Acestes, a friend to Aeneas. Acestes made them most welcome, and after the Trojans had rested and refreshed themselves, they went

to the grave of Anchises, where Aeneas made an offering, pouring out libations of milk and blood upon the altar that stood there. While Aeneas stood praying, a snake came out of the earth and coiled itself up onto the altar, where it lay lapping up the offerings. Aeneas took this as a propitious sign that his father had heard his prayers, so he ordered a great sacrifice to be made. When the bullocks and rams had been ritually slaughtered, the meat was cooked and shared in a great feast, as was the custom. Nine days did Aeneas and the Trojans tarry in Drepanium, and on the ninth day they held funeral games in honor of Anchises.

While the men watched and competed in the games, the women stayed by the grave of Anchises, mourning for him. Enraged that the Trojans were again making their way to Italy, Juno sent her messenger, Iris, to make mischief among the women, and thus prevent the Trojans from leaving Sicily. In the form of an old woman named Beroe, Iris inflamed the hearts of the women against further voyaging. "We are better off staying here where we are," she said. "Let us therefore put fire to the ships, that we may wander no more but make a home for ourselves and our children."

She then took up a burning branch from one of the altars and threw it into one of the nearby ships. The other women hesitated at first, but then followed suit, their minds turned by the power of Juno. One woman, however, was not misled. "That is not Beroe!" she cried. "It is a goddess, sending madness among us. Beroe is not here, for she has fallen ill and could not come to the lamentation with us; I left her abed not an hour ago."

But it was too late; many of the ships had already been set ablaze, and her work well done, Iris vanished from among them. The smoke from the burning rose into the sky, and soon the crowd at the games saw it. Ascanius leapt onto a horse and galloped to the harbor, where he saw flames licking at hulls and sails and masts. He cried out in horror and admonished the women. Aeneas soon joined him, and made fervent prayer to Jupiter, for there was no way else to save the burning vessels. Jupiter heard his pleas and sent a torrent of rain that put out the fires. When the rain stopped, the Trojans saw that while many ships were damaged, and only four were burnt beyond use.

Now Aeneas felt discouraged indeed. What should he do? For he could no longer carry all of the Trojans in the remaining ships, and Acestes also had invited him and his people to settle there in Sicily. That night, Aeneas had a dream that his father Anchises came to him. Anchises said, "My son, listen to the words of your father! The commands of the gods must not be ignored. Voyage on to Italy! Take

with you a band of picked men, stouthearted warriors all, for you will have need of their valor in the trials that are to come, and such women as are willing. But go you first to Cumae and seek out the Sibyl who lives there. Ask for her wisdom, and then beg of her safe passage across the Lake of Avernus to the Land of the Dead, that we may speak face to face. For my time here is too short, and I have much to say to you.”

Aeneas awoke, and thought on what Anchises had said in his dream. Soon it became clear to him what he must do. First, he begged land of Acestes on which to build a new city where the women and those men who also had tired of the voyage might settle. Generous Acestes granted the Trojan prince’s request, gladly, and the settlers promised their new king their fealty. Then Aeneas returned to the harbor, where he and his remaining comrades and those women who wished to journey on repaired their burnt ships and provisioned them for their voyage. When that was done, they took their leave of their countryfolk and expressed their gratitude to Acestes for his hospitality, then once more set sail for Italy and the land of Latium that the gods had commanded they seek.

On Aeneas and his comrades sailed, until one night jealous Juno saw that they were making good headway. She therefore sent Somnus, god of sleep, to put a spell on Palinurus, who sat vigilant as ever at the tiller of Aeneas’ ship. Palinurus resisted to his utmost, but in the end, he was no match for the god: his hand on the tiller softened in sleep. Without the strength of Palinurus’ guidance, the rudder gave a mighty lurch, throwing over the tiller and pushing the helmsman overboard. Aeneas woke as the ship heeled over and found that his steadfast friend had been lost in the deep. Mourning, Aeneas took the helm himself.

The Cumaean Sibyl and the Descent into Hades

Not long thereafter, the Trojans found themselves off the western coast of Italy, near the town of Cumae. They put in at the harbor there, for not only had they need of rest and food, but also Aeneas had need of the wisdom of the Sibyl, as Anchises had told him. While his companions tended to the ships and the other necessities of making camp, Aeneas went to the Sibyl’s cave and asked of her what he should do. She told him that first he must go to the nearby Temple of Apollo and make sacrifice to the god there. Together he and the Sibyl went to the temple, where Aeneas did all that was right and needful. Then the Sibyl led Aeneas back to her cave, where she fell into a

trance, possessed by the god Apollo.

“Brave Aeneas!” said the Sibyl, her voice sounding as though it came from the very depths of her cave with its hundred passageways, for now was the god speaking through her. “You have come through many sore trials, but the sorest yet is still before you. The home you seek awaits you, but war lurks there also, and the waters of the Tiber stained crimson with blood! Strife you shall have, for in Latium also dwells the child of a goddess, a warrior skilled and strong as was Achilles himself. Strife you shall have, for Juno has not forgotten her hatred of Troy. Strife you shall have, for again you must wed a woman not of your own people, and again shall such a woman bring you grief. But be you stouthearted, for you shall prevail! And when the time comes, look you to the Greek city for aid.”

Thus ended the prophecy, and when the god had receded and the Sibyl once again come to herself, Aeneas asked her to tell him how he might journey to the Land of the Dead, for he had heard that an entrance lay nearby. The Sibyl told him to look for a certain tree on the shores of the nearby Lake of Avernus, and that on that tree grew a golden bough. If the gods willed it that a living man might walk Hades, the Land of the Dead, Aeneas would be able to pluck that bough with ease, and that this would give him safe passage into Hades, where he must then present the bough to Proserpina, wife of Pluto, the god of the dead.

Aeneas went to the shores of the Lake and, guided by two doves sent by his divine mother, easily found the tree with its golden bough. He grasped the bough in his hand. It broke off from the tree with ease, and no sooner had it done so than another sprang up in its place. Aeneas brought the bough back to the Sibyl, who led him to the cave where the entrance lay. They arrived at the banks of the River Styx that divides the lands of the living from those of the dead. There they met Charon, the ferryman who takes souls across that river. Aeneas went to get into Charon’s boat, but the ferryman protested.

“Stay,” said Charon, “for you are a living man, and may not cross.”

“He holds the golden bough,” said the Sibyl. “The gods have given him the right to enter. You may not deny him passage.”

Charon relented, and let Aeneas into his boat, with the Sibyl as his guide. It was a dark and lonely journey, but nothing compared to what awaited Aeneas on the other side. Many horrors did he see: Cerberus, the three-headed dog who guards the gates of Hades; souls in torment in Tartarus; monsters and demons who fought and were vanquished by heroes of old. But then Aeneas and his guide came to

the Fields of Mourning, where are the souls of those who died for love. There Aeneas met Dido, and he wept to find that she had slain herself for love of him, and then again when her shade would not hear how it was the will of the gods he followed, and not his own heart.

Then they came to the place where dwelled the shades of warriors and heroes who had died in battle. There Aeneas met many of his old friends, and he rejoiced to see them. One there was who Aeneas mourned to see, and that was Deiphobus, to whom Helen had been given as a wife after the death of his brother Paris, and who had been killed by Menelaus when Helen opened his chamber to the Greeks during the sack of Troy.

Finally, they arrived at the palace of Pluto, where Aeneas went before the throne and lay the golden bough at the feet of Pluto's queen, Proserpina, making all reverence to her and to the god of the dead. That done, Aeneas and the Sibyl were allowed entrance into the Fields of Elysium, where the souls of the blessed dwelled in peace and joy. After some searching, they found the shade of Aeneas' beloved father, Anchises. They rejoiced to see one another again, and there Anchises showed Aeneas all the great things that were yet to come, the deeds of the kings and generals who would be Aeneas' descendants and the founders of a great empire. Among these were Romulus, who would establish the great city of Rome, and the emperors Julius Caesar and Augustus Caesar, also of Aeneas' line, who would bring a new golden age to the world. Then Anchises led Aeneas and the Sibyl towards the gates they would use to leave the Land of the Dead, and on the way told his son of the wars he himself must fight and the things he must to do be victorious.

After saying a fond farewell to his father's shade, Aeneas went through the gate, accompanied by the Sibyl, where they found themselves once again at the mouth to her cave. Aeneas thanked the Sibyl greatly for all her help, and returned to his companions, who awaited him on the shore. Heartened by all he had heard from Anchises, Aeneas encouraged his friends with bold words, and once again they took ship, sailing ever northwards along the Italian coast. Neptune himself sent them fair winds, and soon they saw the mouth of the River Tiber, surrounded by forest. Aeneas ordered that they furl their sails and set their backs to the oars. They found a good mooring-place under the trees and beached their ships. Then they brought out what little food they had left and prepared a meal for themselves.

Seeing that after this meal they would have no further food in their stores, Ascanius laughed and said to Aeneas, "And so we begin our conquest with a famine, eh, Father?"

It was then that Aeneas realized he had come near to the end of his quest, for the harpy had prophesied this very thing, in those days when the Trojans had only just left their homeland. He therefore ordered that libations should be poured out to the gods of Troy, and to his own father Anchises, and also especially to Jupiter, by whose command they had arrived on these shores. In answer to the libations came a peal of thunder even though the day was cloudless, which Aeneas and his companions took to be the approval of mighty Jupiter. And so, they ate and drank with great merriment, and spent the rest of the day enjoying themselves.

The Arrival in Latium and War with Turnus

In the morning, Aeneas sent scouts to find out in which land they were. Soon the scouts returned rejoicing with the news that the river was indeed the Tiber, that the land was Latium, and that the king dwelled in a city called Laurentum, after the sacred laurel tree that was planted within the palace precincts. Aeneas therefore sent a hundred picked men as ambassadors to the palace of the king, all richly dressed and bearing palm branches and gifts as tokens of peace, and while they were gone he ordered that fortifications be made around the Trojan camp that all might be secure.

The embassy of the Trojans soon arrived at the palace, and they were escorted inside. There they presented their gifts to the king, whose name was Latinus. They gave him a golden libation bowl that had belonged to Anchises, and the crown, robe, and scepter of Priam, king of Troy. The ambassadors told Latinus the tale of the sack of Troy and their wanderings through the world, and how they had come to this land at the command of Jupiter himself, and that their leader was of divine stock. They vowed that the Trojans came in peace, wanting nothing more than land in which to make their home, and that they would never offer war to Latinus unprovoked.

Latinus listened carefully and well to all they said, for he was a wise man and a just ruler. To the ambassadors of Aeneas he said, "You are welcome to our shores, and I will grant what you ask. My house, too, is of divine origin, for we trace our descent from Saturn himself. I welcome you not only because of the demands of hospitality to strangers and those fleeing war, but also because I deem your coming is in answer to prophecy. I am an old man, as you see, and although I have a daughter I have no male heir to take the throne when I die. But it was commanded of us by a seer that my Lavinia should be wed to a prince from a foreign land, and not to any man from among our own

people. It would seem that that prophecy is fulfilled by the arrival of your leader. Therefore, I bid you welcome, and I send with you in return an invitation that your leader come to my palace forthwith, that I may receive him as a king receives a noble visitor.”

Latinus then ordered that each ambassador be given a horse from among those in the royal stables, with saddles and bridles and all that was needful and all of the finest quality. Also, he sent back with them a fine chariot to carry Aeneas back to the palace in a manner befitting a prince.

From lofty Olympus, Juno saw all that transpired, and her fury towards the Trojans grew all the more. She knew that she would not be able to prevent the Trojans from settling in Latium, nor could she bar Aeneas from marrying Lavinia as the prophecy commanded. But what mischief she could do, what suffering she might cause Aeneas and his companions she vowed to do, and so went to the fearsome abode of the Furies, where she sought out Alecto, bringer of strife.

“Go down to Laurentum,” said Juno, “and ply your skill. Find some way to cause bloody war between the people of Latium and the remnant of Troy.”

Alecto went therefore to Laurentum, where she sought out Amata, wife of Latinus and queen of that land. Now, Amata already was displeased by the arrival of Aeneas, for she had intended that her daughter wed Turnus, who was prince of the Rutuli in a land that neighbored Latium, and kinsman to Latinus. In the hands of Alecto, that displeasure was inflamed into a passion of envy and hatred, and so Amata went to her royal husband and demanded that he send Aeneas and his companions away, and instead give their daughter to Turnus. But Latinus refused to turn from his course, for he was convinced that in Aeneas the prophecy had been fulfilled.

Having been balked by the king, Amata then ran wild through the streets, goaded on by the sting of Alecto’s venom. She screamed out her tale of Latinus’ intentions to wed Lavinia to the newly-arrived foreigner and incited the other women of the town to join her in opposing this plan. Lavinia herself she took and hid in a secret place in the forest of a nearby mountain. Soon enough all of Laurentum was in an uproar .

Alecto then betook herself to Ardea, the land of the Rutuli, where she took the form of the high priestess of Juno, whose temple stood next to the royal palace. There she sought out Turnus, and in the form of the priestess told him of Latinus’ plan to wed Lavinia to Aeneas. “Will you sit here idle and let that aged fool take from you the throne that

should be yours?" said Alecto. "Or will you take arms, as befits a prince and a hero, and fight for your rights?"

But Turnus was not swayed, for he thought the old woman was indeed the priestess. "Be off with you," he said, "I fear nothing from the Trojans, of whose arrival I have indeed known these past days. Get you back to the temple, which is your rightful place, and your duty to attend. Leave matters of statecraft and war to me, and to the men of this land."

Turnus' words enraged the fearsome goddess. She cast aside the guise of the priestess and entered her own terrible form. "Foolish mortal! No mere woman am I, but a goddess of death and war! My bidding shall you do, willing or no!"

Alecto then pierced Turnus' breast with her venom and vanished, returning to Latium to see what further mischief she might cause. Turnus for his part was now enraged against the Trojans. He sent messengers to Latinus saying that if the Trojans were not expelled from Italy's shores, then both Latium and Troy would meet the sons of Rutuli in battle. That done, he mustered his army and told all his people that they must prepare for war.

Meanwhile, the Trojan settlement on the banks of the Tiber grew apace, and the Trojans from time to time sent forth hunters to bring back meat to their camp, for they had not yet acquired herds and flocks of their own. Young Ascanius went forth on the trail of a fine stag. He released an arrow and wounded it in the flank, not knowing that the beast was the pet of a farmer's daughter, who had raised the animal from a fawn. The stag fled back to its home, where the young woman wept to see her friend so sorely wounded. When her father and brothers asked what troubled her, she told them what had happened. Just as she told them this, Ascanius arrived, hot on the trail of the wounded stag.

Goaded on by Alecto, the farmer and his sons assaulted Ascanius, thinking to punish him for his insult to their family. Ascanius fled back towards the ships, with the men of the girl's family and their neighbors in hot pursuit. The Trojans saw Ascanius' plight from afar and armed themselves to protect Aeneas' son from the angry villagers, and to repel them from their camp. The Trojans were well armed and well trained; they pushed back the villagers with ease. Unfortunately, many were wounded and some killed, including one respected elder who had tried to stop the fighting.

Alecto returned to the heavens to tell Juno what she had done. "If you like," said the Fury, "I can spread discord beyond these lands, and

embroil the whole of Italy in war against your enemies.”

But Juno demurred, telling the Fury that her work was both sufficient and pleasing, and that she could return to her own abode .

The villagers, meanwhile, had taken up the bodies of their dead comrades and withdrawn within the walls of Laurentum, where they railed loudly against the violence of the newcomers and lamented the slain. At that very moment, Turnus arrived, announcing how Latinus intended to hand over the throne of Latium to a stranger, and foretelling that soon all of Italy would be in thrall to the invading foreigners. But Latinus would listen neither to the cries of the villagers, nor to the wailings of the queen and the women, nor to the roaring of Turnus.

“I purpose to carry out the will of the gods,” Latinus said to Turnus and to the people. “I will not join you in this ill-advised attack on strangers who came to our country seeking aid, and whose coming was foretold in prophecy. Make war if you must, but it will be without either my blessing or my assistance. I foresee that this will not end well for you, for you set your course against the gods themselves.”

Then Latinus locked himself inside his palace and refused to come out.

Now, in Latium there was a custom that the doors of the Temple of Janus were bolted shut with a hundred bolts in times of peace but were opened in times of war that the spirit of Mars, the god of war who also dwelled within, might be released to fight on behalf of the people. But only the king had the right to loosen those bolts, and Latinus scorned to do that office. Seeing this, Juno descended from the heavens. She unbarred the great doors herself and opened them wide. Soon the spirit of war was spread far and wide throughout Latium. Smiths worked ceaselessly at their forges and armorers in their shops, turning out weapons. The allies of Turnus and the Latins or, indeed, any at all who felt the least grudge against the Trojans, marshalled their troops and brought them to Laurentum.

When Aeneas and his companions saw the forces assembling within the walls of Laurentum, they knew not what to do. For although they were stout warriors all, skilled in arms and hardened by the dangers of war and long travels, they had no such numbers as to meet Turnus and his allies in battle and think to win the day. But they need not have despaired, for aid came to Aeneas in the form of a dream. In this dream, the spirit of the river-god Tiberinus appeared, speaking words of encouragement to the hero and letting him know that his cause was just and his victory the will of the gods. Tiberinus told Aeneas to seek out a man named Evander, a Greek who had erected a colony with

some of his countrymen in a place further up the river. Evander and the Latins were ever at strife with one another, so he was likely to join Aeneas' cause. "Do you these things," said Tiberinus, "and in exchange I ask that when victory is yours, you go to my shrine and offer me due sacrifice."

Then the god vanished, and Aeneas awoke. The first thing Aeneas did when he arose from his bed was to take water from the river in his hands, making a solemn vow to Tiberinus that not only would he himself make the necessary offerings, but that he would also see to it that the river-god had due honor in perpetuity. That done, Aeneas chose two of the swiftest ships and two bands of picked men, and while all was being made ready for the journey he sacrificed a sow and her litter to Juno. Then Aeneas and his men rowed with all speed up the river to Pallanteum, the city of Evander. As they glided along, Aeneas rejoiced to see that Tiberinus made the water of the river as smooth as glass that the rowers might go with all speed.

Embassy to Pallanteum and Etruria

At Pallanteum, meanwhile, Evander and his son, Pallas, and the people of his city were near the riverbank engaged in making their customary sacrifices to Hercules in thanks for him having rescued them from an evil giant. The Pallanteans were alarmed to see two ships of war making their swift way along the river towards their city. Evander and his son went as quickly as they could to the riverbank and were relieved to see that the leader of the ships was holding out an olive branch in token of peace.

"Who are you, and why have you come?" said Pallas to the Trojans, once the ships were beached.

Aeneas stepped forward. "I am Aeneas, son of Anchises. I come in quest of Evander, king of this land, for we have dire need of his aid. We ask this even though you are Greek and we are Trojan, but our two peoples alike can claim the mighty Atlas as our forefather; therefore, I call upon you as kinsmen, in the hope that you will come to us in our hour of need. The Latins are making war upon us without just cause. Turnus, prince of the Rutuli, leads them, and has assembled a host of his allies. We understand that you also have reason to oppose the Latins, and we call on you to take arms with us against this common foe."

Evander listened carefully to all Aeneas said, then replied, "I am Evander whom you seek. I knew Anchises in my youth and counted him a friend. You shall have everything you ask, men, horses, and weapons alike, and all this shall be readied for you on the morrow.

But first let us banquet together, for today we keep festival in honor of Hercules, and those rites must not be set aside.”

Aeneas and his companions agreed, gladly, and went along with the Pallanteans to pour out libation and make sacrifice. On the way back to the city, Evander told Aeneas the history of Italy, and pointed out to him all the places that were most fair and ripe for the foundation of a city, and which in time would become the site on which mighty Rome herself would rise among the hills.

After passing a pleasant day and restful night in the city of Evander, Aeneas and his generals took counsel of Evander and Pallas.

“I and my people have not the strength you need to defeat Turnus and his allies,” said Evander, “although all that we have is yours to command. But if you ask my advice, I suggest to you that you go to Tarchon, chief of the Etruscans. He and his people expelled from them their ruler Mezentius, a cruel man who used his people hardly and then fled to Turnus for protection. They wish to make war upon Turnus and the Latins that Mezentius be delivered up to them to meet justice, but prophecy states that they will not succeed if they are led by an Italian chief. I myself cannot offer them this aid, for although I was born in Arcadia I have seen too many winters, and my son Pallas, though strong and well trained in the arts of war, was born here in Italy of an Italian mother. Do you, therefore, go to Tarchon and make alliance with him. The Etruscans are fierce warriors indeed and will gladly lend you their strength if you lend them yours.”

While Aeneas was considering this course of action, a peal of thunder rocked the sky. All looked towards the clouds, whereupon another peal sounded, and a shining figure clad in armor seemed to appear in the sky. Aeneas’ companions and the Pallanteans were afraid, but Aeneas reassured them saying that it was but the sign his divine mother had promised to him on the eve of the battle that would bring him the conquest. Thus reassured, the Pallanteans hastened to make the preparations for and assemble the troops Evander had promised: four hundred picked horsemen, strong and fearsome warriors all, clad in bright armor and wielding long, sharp spears, all under the command of Pallas.

Evander also gave horses to Aeneas and the small band of his companions who would form the embassy to the Etruscans, while the remaining Trojans would take ship and return to the encampment near Laurentum to tell Ascanius and the others what had transpired in Pallanteum and what was yet to come if all went well for Aeneas in Etruria. After making the necessary sacrifices to the gods, Aeneas and Pallas and their companions took leave of Evander and set out in

search of Tarchon.

Now, while Aeneas was at Pallanteum, his divine mother had not been idle. She went to her husband, lame Vulcan, and begged of him arms for her son, that he might have the victory in the coming battle. Vulcan agreed, and set to work with his Cyclopes making a helmet, breastplate, and greaves, along with a sword, spear, and mighty shield befitting the son of a goddess. These were finished just as Aeneas was setting out for Etruria, and when he and his army stopped to water their horses, Aeneas saw something glinting among the trees a short way off. He went to see what it was, and found fair Venus waiting for him with the armor. He gave thanks to his mother for the gifts, not least for their usefulness, but because the shield especially had been decorated with many scenes revealing the future of Rome and her mighty empire, that Aeneas might know what was to come of his conquest.

The First Attack on the Trojans

Turnus, for his part, was waiting in Laurentum for the right time to strike, and Juno in the heavens did likewise. Seeing that Aeneas and some of his band had departed, Juno sent Iris down to Turnus, to encourage him to attack the Trojans while their leader was absent. This Turnus did, summoning his army to attack the fortifications the Trojans had set up around their camp. Wisely, and in obedience to Aeneas' command, the Trojans did not leave their camp but rather defended it from within. Turnus and his companions could make no headway against the strong Trojan defense, and so thought to cut off their escape on the water by setting fire to their ships. But the ships had been made from trees sacred to Cybele, mother of the gods, who favored Aeneas at the behest of Jupiter and fair Venus. When the Rutuli launched blazing brands at the Trojan ships, the ships unmoored themselves and dove beneath the surface of the river, only to resurface as nymphs. The Rutuli then saw that some divine power was at work, and so withdrew, but at Turnus' command the Latins and their allies made camp outside the Trojan fortifications, waiting their chance to attack and slaughter the last remnant of Troy.

During the night, two brave Trojans, Nisus and Euryalus, thought to steal their way through Turnus' camp and so bring news of the siege to Aeneas. The Latins, assured of their victory, had passed the evening in gaming and drinking, and now lay heavy with sleep. As they went through the camp, the two Trojans slew many, officers and soldiers alike, and took plunder away with them. But they were soon discovered and slain by the Rutuli, and their bodies borne back to the walls and displayed as trophies before the sorrowing Trojans.

No sooner had the sun arisen but Turnus ordered the attack. The battle was sharp and bloody, and soon the Latins had entered the defenses of the Trojans. Many fine warriors fell on both sides. Turnus found himself alone, within the walls of the enemy, but he did not falter: instead, he fought himself free and, in a last effort to escape, threw himself into the river, fully armed as he was, and swam to the other side where he was received by his friends. The Trojans continued to fight, banding together to push the Latins from their walls and once again make their fortifications secure.

As the battle raged around and within the Trojan encampment, mighty Jupiter looked down in displeasure. "It had been my will," he said, "that the Trojans settle in Italy without need for force of arms. Who is it that has fomented this war? For it is not yet time for the descendants of Aeneas and of the city of Troy to find themselves at war with other states: that is yet to come, when Rome and Carthage shall contend between them for the supremacy, as I have ordained. Until that time, I command you all to stand aside, and interfere no further with the course of events."

Both Venus and Juno protested, the one arguing for Jupiter to interfere on the side of the Trojans and relieve them from the siege, while the other stated her case to allow the war to continue. But Jupiter would hear neither of them, instead commanding both their silence and obedience, saying that now that battle had been joined, there was naught for any god or goddess to do but await whatever the Fates might have in store for both sides.

Aeneas, meanwhile, had reached the Etruscan camp. He came before Tarchon and the other generals and pleaded his case. Seeing that this was the foreign leader that had been prophesied to them, the Etruscans gladly agreed to an alliance with the Trojans. Aeneas and his comrades therefore made all haste back to the Trojan camp in their ships and the Etruscans in theirs, while the four hundred horses given by the Pallanteans and the cavalry of Etruria galloped overland to relieve the siege. As the ships glided along the river, they were met by the nymphs who had emerged when the Trojan ships slipped beneath the water. The nymphs bade Aeneas make haste, for the armies of Turnus were ready to receive the assault of the cavalry, and the Trojan encampment was badly outnumbered. The nymphs then gathered around the Trojan and Etruscan ships pushing them forward faster than any crew could row .

Seeing the gleaming shield of Aeneas from afar, the Trojans rejoiced at the arrival of reinforcements, and especially of their chief, who had about him the aspect of a god in his stature and strength and divine

arms. But Turnus gathered up his troops to make a bulwark against the newcomers, hoping to turn them back before they could form themselves into ranks. Try as they might, the warriors of Turnus could not defeat Aeneas, who strode into their midst, laying many of their best warriors low with single strokes of his sword.

In another part of the field, the cavalry of Pallas arrived, but the ground was so uneven that he and his men were obliged to fight on foot. The Rutuli took courage from this, and pressed the assault, so that the Pallanteans began to fall back. But brave Pallas rallied them, and so the battle raged on, neither side gaining ground against the other. On and on they fought, until Turnus came to where Pallas was. Pallas threw his spear mightily at the Rutulian prince, but his dart only grazed his foe. Then Turnus launched his own javelin at the son of Evander, piercing shield, armor, and flesh alike. There the mighty warrior of Pallanteum died on the battlefield.

Upon hearing of the death of Pallas, Aeneas became enraged. First, he took prisoners to be sacrificed on Pallas' funeral pyre, then mowed his way through the ranks of the Rutuli, and none could withstand his onslaught. So great an assault did the Trojan hero make upon the armies of Turnus that Ascanius and his comrades within the walls were able to put forth a sortie, and soon they, too, were wreaking havoc among the Latin foe.

Jupiter watched the course of the battle from his heavenly seat, and was greatly displeased, for how could Aeneas and the Trojans be making such headway against a more numerous foe, but with divine assistance? Surely the power at Venus was here at work, aiding her beloved son and his companions in their fight. Juno saw this also, and begged Jupiter to intervene or, if he would not, to at least allow her the rescue of Turnus. To this last request Jupiter agreed, and so by means of a ruse Juno caused Turnus to leave the field. She made a shade in the likeness of Aeneas to taunt Turnus, and to lead him onto a ship, which she then unmoored and sent sailing down the river, whether Turnus willed it or no. Seeing that he had been tricked and fearing that his men would think him a coward for leaving in the midst of the battle, the Rutulian prince tried to fall on his own sword in shame, but each time Juno prevented him, and soon he was brought safely to port in the city of his father, King Daunus.

While Aeneas was raging up and down the battlefield looking for Turnus, he came upon Mezentius, that cruel leader whom the Etruscans hated so. They engaged one another in combat, and Mezentius was wounded. When Aeneas sprang forward to give the death-blow, Mezentius' son, Lausus, sprang between the Trojan hero

and his wounded father while Mezentius' companions bore him away to safety. Lausus fought bravely but could not defeat the Trojan prince. In the end, Aeneas killed him, but in honor of Lausus' courage and filial piety he ordered that the body not be despoiled but rather returned to the Latin camp to be buried according to the customs of Lausus' people .

Upon hearing that Lausus had been slain, Mezentius took horse against Aeneas despite his wound. Aeneas was himself on foot; rather than trying to contend with a mounted man, he took aim at the charger with his javelin, and brought the great beast down, with Mezentius beneath it. As Aeneas went to give the death-blow, Mezentius said, "I do not fear my coming death, for it is death I came out to meet when I heard that my Lausus was slain. But do you keep my body safe from the Etruscans who would defile it after my death, and I do not begrudge you the spoils of my armor."

A Brief Truce, and a Trojan Attack

Soon enough, the battle was over, and the slain were taken into camp to receive due reverence. Aeneas hung the armor of Mezentius from a tree in token of his victory in the field, and wept over the body of Pallas, for whom he had felt responsible in the absence of the young man's father. Then the Trojan leader was called to the gate of the camp, for emissaries from the Latins were approaching, bearing olive branches.

"We come to beg the bodies of our dead comrades, that they might receive proper funeral rites," they said.

Aeneas assented. "Gladly I grant this," he said, "for I am not at war with you but with your leader. I came here in peace, to find a home for my people, and in peace I intended to stay. I and my companions never meant any harm to you or your countrymen. Turnus it was who picked this fight, and if he insists on settling things with weapons, why could he not have met me himself, man to man, and let strength and the will of the gods decide the outcome, rather than shedding so much blood? But no one can turn back time, and what has been done is done. Take the bodies of your friends, therefore, and do for them all that is right and needful."

At this the Latins were struck silent, for they had not been expecting the mercy of Aeneas. Then one of them spoke up, an older man named Drances, a counselor of King Latinus, who had no love for Turnus. "Prince of Troy, I saw your might on the battlefield this day, but did not hope to see it so matched by your justice. You speak truly. Latinus is our king, not Turnus. Let Turnus make his own war, and his own

pacts. We for our part join ourselves with you and will gladly help you build a new city for your people.”

Drances’ companions readily agreed to this, and so they concluded a truce of twelve days with the Trojans, in which the first duty to be done was to give the proper rites to the dead. Trojans and Latins went together to the woods around Latium, chopping down trees on which to burn the bodies of the dead. Pyres were kindled in the Trojan and Latin camps alike. Warriors mounted their horses and rode around the flames, sorrowing and lamenting their lost friends. In Pallanteum, Evander mourned his dead son, whose body had been carried respectfully thither by Trojan emissaries, while in Laurentum the wives and mothers of the Latin dead keened and sent furious words after Turnus, hating him for starting a needless war out of wounded pride. Drances fanned this discontent by saying that Aeneas had issued to Turnus a challenge to single combat, but Turnus for his part did not reply: he still had powerful friends in Latium, especially in Queen Amata, and he still awaited news from the embassy he had sent to Diomedes, a Greek chieftain who had settled in Italy after the Trojan War.

And so, passed the twelve days of truce, until finally those emissaries returned. King Latinus summoned a council to hear their report. Any hopes that the Latins might have had of aid from Diomedes were soon crushed: the Greek leader said that he found no reason to fight with Aeneas, who he found to be an honorable man; that he would send no troops; and that it was his counsel that the Latins make peace with the Trojans as soon as may be. King Latinus, who was more convinced than ever that Aeneas was the foreign prince told of in prophecy, said that he found the advice of Diomedes to be worth following. Drances, who sat in the council chamber, agreed strongly with this recommendation, for neither could he see good reason for continuing the war. But Turnus spurned the words of Drances, who for all his eloquence in council was not a distinguished warrior.

“Of course, you counsel truce!” Turnus said. “For you know you have little worth on the field. But bolder souls and stronger there are than you, and even though we may not have won the day before, still there is time. Who knows what may chance at the next encounter? Know this also: if Aeneas desires single combat with me, I will gladly meet him. Unless, of course, Drances would prefer to act as champion?”

While the Latins sat thus arguing about their course, a messenger came running into the council chamber bringing the news that the Trojans and Etruscans had assembled their army and were headed towards the city in battle array. Turnus ran out of the chamber to arm

himself and muster his own troops. As he did so, he met Queen Camilla of the Volscians, who had allied herself to Turnus' cause, and together they agreed on a plan of battle that they hoped would defeat their foe. When all was prepared, the gates of the city opened and the Latins rushed forth. Once again, battle was joined, with many deeds of valor on both sides. But in this battle, Camilla fell. Now, this queen was a favorite of the goddess Diana, and she had vowed that Camilla's body would not be despoiled if the Fates demanded she die in the fight. Taking up the queen's body, she transported it in a cloud to her own land, where it was buried with all dignity.

The death of Camilla turned the tide of the battle. Seeing that their queen was vanquished, the Volscians turned in retreat, followed by many of the Latin troops. They were hotly pursued by the Trojans and Etruscans, and many were slaughtered outside the walls of Laurentum as they struggled to pass through gates that were too narrow for that number of men. Turnus tried to rally his troops and turn back the Trojans, but darkness was descending, and soon both armies were obliged to withdraw from the field to await a new day .

Challenge to Single Combat and the Victory of Aeneas

In Laurentum, Turnus saw that the Latins had no further stomach for fighting. He, however, could lay aside neither his pride nor his thirst for victory. Turnus therefore went to King Latinus and renewed his proposal to meet Aeneas in single combat and let the outcome of that battle decide the matter. But Latinus advised against it saying, "Surely there are other brides to be had for you, young women of good family and noble in virtue? Why is it that you persist with what is surely to be a vain pursuit that leads only to your own death? Make peace with Aeneas. He seems a reasonable man, and just, and I now intend more than ever that Lavinia should be his bride; indeed, that marriage is a thing I ought to have seen done from the very first, rather than wait and thus see the Tiber run red with the blood of Laurentum. Think also of your father: he loves you well, and you have done right by him and by your people as their leader. Do not deprive them of your strength, for they may have need of it still."

But no matter the entreaties of Latinus, or even of Queen Amata, Turnus would not be stayed. He sent a messenger to the Trojan camp, challenging Aeneas to single combat. Aeneas for his part was glad to accept, and thus see the conflict ended without further bloodshed. A day was set for the combat, and a space marked out in a field near the city. At the appointed time, Turnus and Aeneas arrived at the place

with their armies. King Latinus also was there, and before the combat was to begin the Trojans and Latins offered rich sacrifice to the gods and pledged that they would accept forever the outcome of the combat as the final resolution of their quarrel. But before Turnus and Aeneas could begin to fight, Juturna, sister of Turnus who had been turned into a nymph by the favor of the gods, was incited by Juno to protect her brother by fomenting strife amongst the armies. Taking the form of a Latin soldier, she began grumbling about how unseemly it was for an army that so outnumbered the Trojans to meekly accept the outcome of single combat rather than victory in war as the end to their strife.

Just as she said this, an eagle swooped down towards the river and snatched up a swan in its talons. The eagle was pursued by a flock of waterfowl, who attacked the eagle until it dropped its prey and flew off. A priest of the Rutuli, having heard the words of Juturna, interpreted this as an omen of victory over the Trojans. Inciting his fellows to attack, the priest hurled a javelin at the Trojan army, killing one of Aeneas' men. The insult not to be borne, the Trojans rushed to fight the Rutuli and Latins, and battle was joined.

Aeneas stood amazed at this, for only just then had he and the leaders of his enemies solemnly vowed to decide their quarrel with single combat. While he stood there trying to bring his troops back to order, an arrow flew from the Latin side and pierced his armor. Thus wounded, Aeneas could not fight. His friends carried him back to the ships, where the physician tried in vain to pull the barbed arrow from the wound. Then Venus, unseen, put dittany and ambrosia into the water the physician was using to bathe the wound. The arrow thus slid out easily of its own accord, and the flesh knitted itself back together as though it had never been pierced.

The Trojan hero resumed his arms and, gathering about him many scores of troops, returned to the battlefield, where he wrought havoc amongst the Latins and Rutuli. But no matter how he strove, he could not get close enough to Turnus to engage him. As the battle went on, Aeneas saw that the city itself was relatively undefended, since most of the Latins and Rutuli were out on the battlefield. Summoning his generals, he told them his plan: that they should take a strong force and attack the city directly, while it was vulnerable, and once inside demand that the Latins surrender or have the entire city razed to the ground. The generals agreed this was a good plan and did as Aeneas said. They took ladders and assailed the city which, as Aeneas saw, had not the strength to repel their advance.

Turnus had worked his way to the edges of the battlefield. But soon he

heard cries that the city itself was under assault, and so he began to assemble his men to return to Laurentum and render what aid he could. As he did so he was met by his sister, Juturna, still in her guise as a Rutulian warrior. "Turn not for Laurentum, my brother. Surely there are others there who can defend the city. Let us instead slay what Trojans we can and diminish their numbers on the field."

Turnus recognized his sister. "I knew it was you who kindled this new strife, rather than let the combat go forward. Yes, I am to die: I know that and I care not. But I would not have it said that Turnus was a coward who refused aid when it was begged of him."

When he had finished saying this, a messenger arrived telling him how the Trojans were already within the city walls, that King Latinus still skulked within his palace, and that Queen Amata had taken her own life in despair over the war she had started. Turnus then took leave of his sister, saying, "Farewell! I go now to my fate, whatever that might be. I shall engage Aeneas as I promised, for no man shall say of Turnus that he failed to keep his word."

Turnus went to the city, and when he arrived shouted for the Rutuli to withdraw that he might meet Aeneas as they had agreed to do that day. The soldiers held off their fighting and made way for him, and Aeneas, having heard Turnus' challenge, made his way to the place where his enemy was, and thus finally commenced the single combat that was to decide the fate not only of Latium but of all Italy.

First the two warriors threw their javelins, but neither did the other any hurt thereby. Then they drew their swords. Blow upon blow they struck, upon blade, upon shield, but no clear victor there was until Turnus aimed a mighty stroke that Aeneas blocked with his shield. Now, Turnus was not using his own strong sword: in his haste he had taken the sword of his charioteer, and it was not made to withstand the shock of hitting that divine shield. The sword shattered, and all there was left was the hilt and the stump of the blade. Turnus turned and fled, and Aeneas leapt after him, swift as a hound at the chase. Turnus called for a sword as he ran, but Aeneas threatened to slay any who gave him one. And so, five times they ran about the space where they had been fighting, until Aeneas paused at the olive tree that lay hard by, in which his spear had become transfixed earlier in the day. While Aeneas strove to pull the spear out, Turnus prayed to the god Faunus, to whom the tree was sacred, to keep the weapon firmly fixed there. Faunus heard the prayer of Turnus, and so while Aeneas was thus distracted Turnus was able to go to his chariot and get his own sword, which was handed to him by Juturna, still in her disguise. Venus saw that Turnus was once again armed. She used her power to

force Faunus to yield to Aeneas his spear, and so once again the two warriors faced one another in the open space, armed and ready for battle.

On a nearby cloud, the gods watched the struggling of Aeneas and Turnus. Jupiter turned to Juno and said, "What, have you finally decided to let Fate take its course? Why are you here, and not assisting your champion on the field? Or should I but rejoice that you finally deign to obey my commands?"

Juno replied, "I for my part have abandoned Turnus. There is nothing more that I can do, for Fate cannot be denied. But I swear to you that although I asked Juturna to foment strife between the Trojans and Latins, I did not command her to take arms or to begin the battle we now see before us. I set aside my desire to thwart Aeneas, but I ask of you that the Latins be allowed their language and their customs, even after the Trojans have conquered. And let the name of the people and the country remain as they are, and Troy forever be forgotten."

To this Jupiter agreed. Juno, satisfied, withdrew her favor from Turnus and the Latins, and returned to Olympus. When she had gone, Jupiter sent a Fury down to the battlefield, disguised as an owl, to tell Juturna that she must no longer assist her brother at all. Both Turnus and Juturna saw this. Turnus' courage failed him, and Juturna, returning to her own form, bade her brother a tearful farewell before diving into the river.

Aeneas saw Turnus quail. "What, then, do you now fear to meet me in battle? Brave enough you were when you had an army at your back, but now you will not face me?"

Turnus said, "It is not you I fear, but the displeasure of the gods."

Cast about for some way to vanquish his foe, Turnus spied a huge rock on the field, a stone of such size that the strength of many men would be needed to lift it. But Turnus was a hero of bygone days, and that strength was in him, or it would have been had he not received the message of the Fury. He lifted the stone over his head, and heaved it with all his might at Aeneas, but the stone fell short. Aeneas took his chance, hurling his spear with all his might at Turnus. Turnus was able to catch it on his shield, but so great was Aeneas' throw that the spear passed through the shield and went deep into Turnus' thigh. Aeneas took his sword and rushed over to where his foe was sunk on one knee.

"I do not expect mercy from you," said Turnus, "but mercy I do ask. And if you but grant it, I solemnly swear to withdraw from this place, and never more will I offer war to you or your people, nor shall I

contend for the hand of Lavinia. But if you kill me, then so be it, for what man can turn Fate aside? All I ask is that you return my body to my father, Daunus, when the deed is done. ”

At first Aeneas faltered, for he felt pity for Turnus. But then he saw that Turnus wore the belt he had stripped from the body of Pallas, and his rage returned to him.

“You are ever a traitor, Turnus, starting a needless war,” he said. “You pay now the price for that deed, and for the death of fair Pallas, whose body you yourself despoiled.”

So saying, Aeneas took his bright sword and plunged it into Turnus’ breast, sending the soul of that warrior flying to Hades.

The Story of the Founding of Rome

As the ancient Greek historian Plutarch (Roman name Lucius Mestrius Plutarchus, 45 – 127 ad) notes in his Lives, there were many myths surrounding the origins of Rome. Some myths traced the foundation of the city to a woman named Roma, others to a man named Romanus who was the son of Ulysses (Gr. Odysseus) and Circe. The most commonly accepted founders, however, were the twin brothers Romulus and Remus, who were cast out by their family as babies and suckled by a she-wolf, and who were taken as founders of the Claudian family, which ruled the Roman Empire for several generations. But even then, there are two diverging accounts of how the twins were begotten and born. Of these, Plutarch says that the tale making them the sons of Rhea Silvia-and through her, descendants of Aeneas-seemed to be the most widely believed, and he traces its origin to various Greek sources. Both Plutarch and the Roman historian Livy also note that in this version of the story, the paternity of the twins was at issue, with some saying that Mars was the father, while others said they were conceived through incestuous rape by her uncle, Amulius. As good historians trying to chronicle all they know about the founding of the city, neither Plutarch nor Livy takes sides with any particular version, but since here we are interested in presenting first and foremost a good story, we have made decisions about the course of the tale to that effect.

After the war between the Trojans and the Greeks ended with the sack of Troy, the hero Aeneas led the Trojan people through many wanderings to settle in Italy, along the banks of the Tiber. Taking in marriage Lavinia, the daughter of the King of Latium, Aeneas set about building a new city, which he called Lavinium, in honor of his wife. Aeneas had a son, Ascanius (sometimes called Iulus), by his first wife, a Trojan woman named Creusa, but when Aeneas died Ascanius was still too young to become the chief of Lavinium. Therefore, his mother ruled as regent in his stead.

When Ascanius came of age, he desired to found a new city of his own. Leaving the rule of Lavinium to his respected and capable stepmother, Ascanius traveled south and, finding a suitable place at the foot of the Alban Mount, there began to build his city, which he named Alba Longa. After the death of Ascanius, his son Aeneas Silvius ruled Alba Longa, as did Latinus Silvius after him, and thus all members of that family bore the name Silvius.

For many generations, the Silvian family ruled Alba Longa, until Proca became king. Proca had two sons, Amulius and Numitor. Numitor was the elder, and Proca made him his heir; but Amulius was power-hungry and greedy, and so thrust Numitor from his throne and took the rule of Alba Longa for himself. Amulius killed all the sons of Numitor, then took his brother's daughter, Rhea Silvia, and appointed her a Vestal, ever to live as a virgin within the temple of Vesta and serve that goddess of hearth and home, that she might never marry and never bear a son having a rightful claim to the throne.

This was no proof against the will of the gods, for one day Mars came down from the heavens and took to himself Rhea Silvia. She soon found that she was with child. Although she strove to keep this secret-for the penalties against a Vestal who broke her vows were most severe-she could not hide her state forever, and in time she gave birth to twin boys. When Amulius discovered this, he fell into a rage. Rhea Silvia he locked away in a prison, and the two boys he ordered put into a reed basket and set adrift on the River Tiber.

The basket floated down the river, finally coming to rest against the riverbank. A she-wolf coming down the river to drink came across the basket and seeing that there were two small motherless babes inside offered her own teats for them to suckle. In this way, a shepherd to Amulius, a man named Faustulus, found the two children being cared for gently by the she-wolf. Taking pity on the children, Faustulus took them home and gave them to his wife, Larentia, to nurse.

Under the care of Faustulus and Larentia, the boys, who were named Romulus and Remus, grew up into young men, tall and strong. They helped their foster-father in his work, they hunted game in the forests, they practiced with bow and spear, they wrestled and boxed. Soon they became well respected in the lands about Faustulus' homestead, for their courage and strength, for their honesty, and for the way they stood up for the weak when oppressed by the strong. Indeed, one of their favorite pastimes was to lay in wait for robbers, despoil them of their plunder, and then share out the goods among the local shepherds. It was not long before Romulus and Remus had gathered about them loyal bands of young men who would gladly do anything

the brothers asked of them.

One day, during the celebration of the feast of Pan when the young men ran about naked in honor of the god, a group of robbers determined to take their revenge upon the twins. The robbers lay in ambush for the lads as they celebrated the festival, and while Romulus was able to fight his way free, Remus was taken captive and brought before Amulius on the charge that he led a band of thieves who had been pillaging the lands of Numitor, who Amulius had allowed to live on an estate near to Alba Longa. Remus therefore was sent to Numitor to face punishment.

Now, although Faustulus had suspected for some time that Romulus and Remus were the twin sons of Rhea Silvia who had been condemned to exposure by Amulius, he had said nothing to anyone about this, seeking to protect the children from their wicked uncle. But seeing that Remus had been taken by the king, Faustulus poured out his story to Romulus, telling him the whole truth of his parentage and how he came to be fostered in a shepherd's hut. Remus, meanwhile, was prisoner at the estate of Numitor. In the course of questioning his young captive, Numitor gradually came to the same conclusion as Faustulus, although he at that time held his peace in the matter .

Upon hearing the truth of his and his brother's parentage, Romulus feared for the life of Remus, and desired to have revenge upon his uncle for his misdeeds. Romulus therefore assembled a band of his friends and headed to the palace of Amulius, where they were soon joined by Remus, who had been set free by Numitor and gathered his own band of companions. Together the brothers and their friends stole into the palace and there Romulus killed the king.

When Numitor heard of the assault on the palace, he at first summoned guards to deal with what he supposed was a foreign invasion; but when Romulus and Remus came to him at the head of their band of stout friends and proclaimed Numitor king, Numitor convened a council of all the nobles of the land. There he told the nobles the story of how Amulius had usurped the throne and killed all Numitor's heirs, and how Amulius had imprisoned Rhea Silvia and condemned Romulus and Remus to exposure. He explained that Romulus and Remus were his own grandsons, and that the vile Amulius had been put to death in answer for his crimes. The nobles and the people gladly proclaimed Numitor their rightful king, and so he took the throne of Alba Longa.

Although the twins could expect to inherit Alba Longa on the death of their grandfather, they did not want to wait for a city of their own to

rule. They thus went out from Alba Longa searching for a place closer to where they had been fostered, to found a new settlement. Along the River Tiber they found a place that seemed good, where the river ran among seven hills. Romulus thought the Palatine Hill by far the best place, partly because it was closest to where they had been found as babes, but Remus disagreed. The Aventine Hill, Remus said, had a better aspect, being less steep and therefore easier to build upon, and that surely was a more pressing reason than the one Romulus clung to. Also, there was the issue of who would rule the city once it was built: since Romulus and Remus were twins, neither could claim to have more of claim than the other because of age. The brothers argued at length over what was to be done, yet neither would yield to the other.

Wishing yet to resolve their quarrel peacefully, they went to Numitor to ask his advice. Numitor suggested that they determine which course to follow by augury, since surely a sign from the gods would be the best guide in such a great undertaking as the foundation of a city. The brothers agreed that this was wise advice, and so returned with their followers to the place along the Tiber. Remus declared the Aventine Hill the place where he would look for augury, while Romulus took the Palatine. While they watched, a flight of six vultures was seen above the Aventine Hill, which Remus took to be a sign that his cause was in the right. But soon after that, Romulus reported twelve vultures over the Palatine Hill. Since they had not determined how the augury was to be interpreted beforehand, Remus claimed himself the victor because birds had been seen over his hill first, while Romulus said the prize should go to him since his hill had the greater number of birds. This time the quarrel did come to blows, and in the fight that ensued Romulus killed his brother, thus becoming sole ruler of the new kingdom.

After seeing that Remus was properly buried, Romulus set about building his new city. First, he plowed a furrow some distance from where the city walls would be, to mark out the boundaries of the city. Then commenced the building of the walls. In time, Romulus instituted laws and a system of government, adopting the Etruscan custom of appointing twelve lictors, counsellors who attended the king and helped mete out justice. Romulus also appointed one hundred senators to help make the laws.

One thing, however, was lacking in this new state: there were insufficient women among the settlers, and therefore insufficient children to carry on its laws and customs when their parents were gone. Romulus therefore sent emissaries to many neighboring cities, asking whether any of their families or women might be willing to join this new enterprise on the banks of the Tiber. But nowhere did

the emissaries find anyone willing to leave their homes and settle in the new city, which was now known as Rome, after the name of its founder. Romulus and his companions took this as a great insult. They decided that if they were not to be allowed brides by consent, then they would have them by force.

The Romans therefore declared that they would hold great games at the feast of Consualia, a harvest festival sacred to Neptune. They sent invitations to all the neighboring cities and made preparations for the sport and the feasting. When the time came, people from the districts all around answered the invitation, gladly coming to watch the competitions and honor the god. The Sabine people attended in particularly great numbers, bringing with them their wives and their children, as did families from other neighboring tribes.

But the games and the feasting were but a ruse. At Romulus' signal, the Romans fell upon the young women who had come for the festival and dragged them back into the city. The families were outraged and demanded the return of their daughters, but the Romans refused, saying that they too had the right to marry and have children, and that it had been unjust of their neighbors to deny this to them. The Romans also promised that they would treat the women well, and that the families had no reason to worry on that score.

This, of course, did not satisfy the families. They went to Titus Tatius, king of the Sabines, asking that he raise an army to get their daughters back. When Titus did not act quickly enough, the other tribes massed their own armies and jointly attacked Rome. But their campaign was ill-conceived and disorganized: soon the attacking armies were routed by Romulus and his troops, and their own towns taken. Before the Romans could despoil the towns and slay the inhabitants, Hersilia, wife of Romulus, begged her husband to spare the townspeople, for their captive daughters had entreated her to ask this of him. Romulus agreed, but on condition they joined the Roman state. To this the defeated townspeople gladly agreed. Some of them moved to Rome itself, while some of the Romans took up homesteads in the defeated districts, both expanding Romulus' rule and making peace between the old cities and the new.

Although Titus Tatius had not participated in the first assaults upon Rome, he had not been idle. He mustered his army and laid his plans carefully. First, one of the Sabine generals bribed a Sabine woman to let soldiers of her own nation into the citadel of Rome. They then killed the woman- although precisely why is not known-and soon the citadel was in the hands of the Sabines. Romulus gathered his army and laid siege, but not until the Romans were at the very gates did the

Sabines give battle. The fight went well for the Romans until their chief general was slain; then the Roman line buckled and the soldiers began to fly from the Sabines. Romulus himself was caught in the flight for the gates. He prayed to Jupiter to give him the victory, promising that a great temple would be built in honor of the god if he were successful and the Sabines defeated. Crying out that the god Jupiter himself commanded that the Romans turn and fight, Romulus rallied his troops, and thus turned the tide of the battle.

Seeing that their menfolk were being put to the slaughter, the Sabine women issued forth from the citadel. They placed themselves between the combatants, saying that they would rather die themselves than see such strife between their parents and husbands. At this, the Sabines and Romans lowered their weapons and agreed to a truce, putting the Sabine territories under the rule of Rome.

Romulus had therefore strengthened his authority and well established his city. Although there were a few more wars in the years that followed, the Romans emerged victorious from all of these. Romulus ruled wisely and well and was respected both by his own people and by his allies. Under him, Rome enjoyed a long period of peace.

Then one day, as Romulus was in the Campus Martius reviewing his army, a storm came down with much thunder. A cloud enveloped Romulus, hiding him from the sight of his men. When the storm passed and the cloud had dispersed, Romulus was nowhere to be found. The senators who had been seated next to the king said that Romulus had been taken up to heaven by a divine storm, and that their king now reigned immortal among the gods themselves. One senator, Proclus Julius, said that Romulus had later appeared to him and said that it was his will that the Roman state thrive and flourish, and that it become the very capital of the world itself. The people agreed that surely their king had been taken up into immortality, and thus they strove to follow his command that Rome become the greatest state on earth.

The Rape of Lucretia

Unlike many myths, the story of Lucretia appears to have some foundation in historical fact. This legend often was used to explain how the Roman monarchy was overthrown and a Republic instituted in its place. The retelling presented here is based on the account by the Roman historian Livy.

When Lucius Tarquinius Superbus was king of Rome, he wished to enhance the grandeur of his city, first by constructing a great temple to Jupiter, and then by engaging in other building projects throughout

the city. To accomplish this, he commandeered the labor and skills of artisans and architects throughout the country. Although they did not mind having to build a temple to their chief god, they much resented Tarquinius continuing to employ them in the manner of slaves after that was done. For this, and for other reasons, Tarquinius was much resented by the Roman populace.

Tarquinius thought to quell their dissatisfaction through a distribution of plunder gained from war with Ardea, the city of the Rutuli. This was not the only reason, however, for besides taking the wealth of the Rutuli, Rome also would benefit by expanding its rule into a new territory. Therefore, preparations for war were made, and the Roman army advanced on Ardea, but their attack on the city failed and the Romans were forced to lay siege.

Now, waiting out a siege is dreary work for a soldier, and frequently the young officers of the army passed the time eating and drinking. One day, as they were drinking in the tent of Sextus Tarquinius, son of the king of Rome, it came to pass that someone mentioned the subject of wives, and soon the men fell to boasting about which of them had the best and noblest spouse. And so, the argument continued, until Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus said, "I know how to settle this, and moreover you all shall learn that my Lucretia surely is the best wife among them. Let us go to our homes, secretly, and see what our wives are doing. This will tell us which one is the noblest of them all."

Sextus and the others agreed that Collatinus' idea was a sound one, and so they took horse and returned to Rome. They arrived at the end of the day and saw that while all the other women were engaged in feasting and merrymaking, in Collatia, Lucretia sat at her loom, working patiently with the bright wool even though darkness had already descended. All the men agreed that Collatinus had won the contest, for Lucretia clearly was the most virtuous woman. The men then presented themselves at the gates of the house, where Collatinus introduced his friends to his wife. Lucretia welcomed them all warmly, as befitted a good hostess. Soon a meal was set for Collatinus and the others, but while they ate Sextus could not keep his eyes off Lucretia. He began to feel a wild lust for her, and a desire to possess her beauty and her virtue for himself, even though she was the wedded wife of another. But he did nothing about it and said nothing of it either to Collatinus or to Lucretia, but rather returned to camp with Collatinus and the others when the meal was done.

No matter what he tried, Sextus could not banish the thought of Lucretia from his mind, so one evening he left camp with one of the camp slaves, but without telling anyone else where he was going, and

returned to the house of Collatinus. There he was received by Lucretia without question, as a friend of her husband, and she gave him willingly the hospitality of her house. A meal was prepared and eaten, after which Lucretia showed Sextus to a guest room where he might spend the night. During the meal, Sextus behaved towards Lucretia with the proper decorum due a Roman matron, but once the household had retired for the night and he deemed that all were enveloped in sleep, he took his sword and stole along to Lucretia's bedroom.

Softly Sextus opened the door and went to the bed. He held Lucretia down with one hand and put his sword to her throat with the other, and upon this she awoke.

"Silence!" said Sextus in a harsh whisper. "Make but a single sound and you die."

Lucretia saw no other course but to obey, and so there she lay naked in her marriage-bed, as Sextus threatened and declared his undying love for her by turns. But no matter what Sextus said, Lucretia steadfastly refused to give herself over to him. Seeing that she was not to be swayed either by honeyed words or by threat of violence, Sextus then said that if she did not submit he would kill the slave who had come with him and claim that he had done so because he caught Lucretia and the slave entwined in love together. This at last broke Lucretia's resolve, for while she did not fear death she could not bear the shame of what Sextus proposed to do, and so Sextus was able to have his way with her. His wicked desire satisfied, Sextus called his slave to him and they returned to the camp.

After Sextus left, Lucretia sent two messengers, each with an identical message, one to her husband and one to her father, bidding them each to find a stout friend and come to her house immediately, for something dreadful had happened. Spurius Lucretius soon arrived with his friend Publius Valerius, and Collatinus with Lucius Junius Brutus, a nephew of the king. The men went into the house and found Lucretia in her chamber, where she sat sorrowing.

Collatinus went to his wife. He knelt by her side and asked what was troubling her.

"Our marriage-bed has been befouled, my husband, for although my spirit rejected him, my body could not. Sextus Tarquinius it was who came here on a false pretext, pretending to be a friend of our house. But his whole purpose was to ravish me and to satisfy his lust with me. I beg of you, do not any of you rest until Sextus has been soundly punished for this deed."

The men were all horrified by this tale, and sought to comfort Lucretia, saying that truly it was Sextus who was at fault, and not her, for they all knew her to be a good woman of great virtue. But nothing they could say would cleanse her of her own feeling of guilt, and so she took a dagger that she had concealed within her robes and stabbed herself through the heart. Husband and father both wailed alike as Lucretia's spirit left her body and gave themselves over to grief. But Brutus went to Lucretia's body and drew forth the dagger. He held it up, dripping with that chaste wife's blood, and swore with great eloquence that he not only would exact justice from Sextus, but from Tarquinius himself and all his house. Then he passed the dagger to the others that they also might so swear. The others at first did not know what to make of this, for they knew Brutus as a rather slow and stupid man. But this had been but a ruse, for Brutus' brother had been put to death by their uncle the king, and so Brutus purposed to do nothing that would arouse Tarquinius' suspicions towards him, although inwardly he hated Tarquinius and awaited a chance to take his revenge.

Having sworn to avenge Lucretia, together the men bore her body into the public square and declared Sextus' treachery to the whole of Collatia. One by one, other citizens came forward to denounce the prince and state other misdeeds he had done towards them as well. Brutus especially encouraged them to dwell on those wrongs, and to take up arms in revolt. Both the grief at Lucretia's violation and death and the sudden change in Brutus helped spur the populace to a warlike spirit.

Gathering together a band of armed warriors, Collatinus and Brutus left the keeping of Collatia to Lucretia's father, and set off for Rome. When they arrived, the people were afraid and wondered what dreadful thing could have happened, for they recognized Collatinus and Brutus, who were important men from powerful families. When Collatinus and Brutus and their companions arrived at the Forum, Brutus sent out criers to summon the people there. He did so by the authority of his role as Tribune of the Celeres, the captain of the king's personal bodyguard, who stood second-in-command to the king himself and who might command a gathering of the people to decide important issues of state.

When the people had gathered in the Forum, Brutus then spoke to them a mighty oration, telling of the crimes of Sextus Tarquinius, of the death of Lucretia, and of the king's unjust demands for labor from the artisans and craftsmen of the city. He also reminded them of how Tarquinius had taken the throne, by the violent overthrow of Servius Tullius, the previous king, and how Tullia, the wife of Tarquinius and

daughter of Tullius, had ridden in her chariot over her father's body, an act of grave impiety. The people listened with rapt attention to all Brutus said, not least because they had not imagined him capable of such eloquence. But in the end, Brutus rallied the populace to his cause, and the people agreed that Tarquinius Superbus should be sent into exile, along with his wife and children.

Brutus therefore chose deputies from among those who volunteered, armed them, and went with them to the camp at Ardea to let the soldiers there know what was happening, and to turn them against the king if they could. The defense of the city was left to Lucretius, who already had been invested as Prefect of the City some time before. Seeing the city in an uproar, and that the populace was turned against her family, Queen Tullia fled the city, and all who saw her as she went cursed her for her misdeeds and those of her family.

Now, word of the uprising in the city reached the king before Brutus and his companions approached the camp. Tarquinius set out with a company of soldiers thinking to quell the revolt. Knowing that the king would go straight to Rome, Brutus took a different route to the camp, that he might not encounter the king directly. Tarquinius arrived at Rome to find himself not only barred from entering, but an exile from his own kingdom. Brutus, meanwhile, was hailed as a liberator by the soldiers at Ardea. The sons of the king were sent away. Two of them went to Etruria with their father, but Sextus chose to go to Gabii instead. This turned out to be a poor decision, since he had many enemies there who held his misdeeds against him. Sextus was not long in Gabii before he was taken by those enemies and slain.

In Rome, Lucretius remained Prefect of the City, and under him the people elected two consuls, Collatinus and Brutus, to help govern. The rule of the consuls was limited to a single year, and other measures were taken to strengthen both the senate and the plebs, an assembly chosen from among families who were not nobles. And thus it was that after two hundred and forty-four years of monarchy, the last twenty-five of which had been under Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, Rome was converted into a Republic.

PART II: ROMAN HERO TALES

Hercules and the Giant of Latium

Virgil's Aeneid contains more than the tale of the voyage of Aeneas and the Trojans, and more than their struggle to found a colony along the Tiber River. There are also several side stories, including this one, about the time Hercules came to Italy and saved the people from an evil giant. In the Aeneid, this story is told by Evander to explain why his people are offering sacrifice to Hercules and making festival when Aeneas arrives to ask for help in his war against Turnus.

The giant in this tale is named Cacus, and he steals part of the herd of Geryon from Hercules (Heracles in Greek) as the hero is driving the cattle back to show Eurystheus, in completion of his tenth Labor. In many Greek versions of the legend, Geryon and his cattle live on an island somewhere to the west, usually said to be off the coast of Spain, and are brought back to Tiryns by sea, but Virgil imagines a grand overland cattle drive that wends its way through Italy, including a stop in Latium, the ancient region along the Tiber where Rome later was founded.

Hercules, the son of Jupiter, was a mighty hero who was bound by an oracle to do ten Labors at the behest of his cousin, King Eurystheus. The tenth of these labors was to steal the cattle of Geryon, a fierce three-headed, three-bodied giant who lived in Spain. By his strength and skill, Hercules killed Geryon and took the cattle, which he drove through Spain and then down into Italy on his way to Tiryns, the city of Eurystheus in Greece.

Coming into the fair land of Latium along the River Tiber, Hercules rested awhile that the cattle might graze on the lush grass and drink at the river. But unbeknownst to the hero an evil fire-breathing giant lived in the hills above the river, a giant who was the terror of the land all around. Cacus was his name, the son of the forge-god Vulcan, and he liked nothing better for his meat than human flesh. What was worse, it was not enough for him to capture and dine upon hapless men and women: he also hung their rotting heads around the mouth of his cave as trophies .

It chanced that Cacus looked out the mouth of his cave and saw Hercules driving the cattle to pasture near the river. Never had the giant seen cattle so fine, and he greatly desired to have some of them for his own, but he feared the hero's strength, and so waited until nightfall to see whether he might steal some of the beasts while Hercules slept. When the sun at last had set and the stars twinkled in a moonless sky, Cacus crept out of his cave and down the hillside. He

grasped the tails of four bulls and four heifers, and thus pulled them back to his cave, for by making them walk backwards he confused the trail that Hercules might not be able to track them down.

In the morning Hercules awoke to find eight of the cattle missing. He looked about trying to find where they had gone but could see no sign. Giving them up for lost, he gathered what remained of the herd and started driving them along. The cattle began to low as they began their journey, and up in the giant's cave their friends heard the call and answered them in kind. Hercules heard the lowing of the captive beasts. He set out in the direction of the sound, and when Cacus saw the hero approach he drove his stolen animals to the back of his cave and lowered the heavy stone that he used to seal the entrance.

Hercules came to the cave, where he could dimly hear the stolen cattle still calling for their herd. Again and again the hero tried his strength against the stone, but it had been bolted from within with great bolts of iron forged by Vulcan himself, bolts so heavy that even the strength of mighty Hercules was not enough to bend them. Three times Hercules hurled himself at the stone door, and three times it shuddered but did not break. The hero went outside the cave and went three times around the hill, trying to find a way in. Enraged at having been thwarted, Hercules climbed to the top of the hill, which was crowned with a peak of bare flint. Putting his hands into a crevice at the base of the crown, Hercules gave a mighty heave and tore the crown off the hill entire, sending it crashing down into the valley below.

Cacus howled as the sunlight poured down into his cave. Hercules stood upon the lip of the gaping hole and threw everything within his grasp at the monster. Boulders and limbs of trees went crashing down into the now-roofless cave. Cacus fought back by belching fire and smoke at the hero, thinking at the very least to conceal himself from the missiles being slung at him, but this only infuriated Hercules further. Hercules leapt into the middle of the smoke and sought out the giant with his hands. No matter the flames the giant sent forth, Hercules could not be stayed. The hero found the giant's neck, and fastening his hands about it, he throttled the great monster until he was dead.

Hercules opened the door to the cave, and the cattle rushed to find their fellows in the pasture below. The hero dragged the monster's body out into the daylight, along with the plunder he found stashed in the recesses of the cave, loot from the giant's continual thieving. The Latin people saw what Hercules had done and rejoiced that their terror was over. And from that day forth, on the anniversary of the

slaying of the giant, they offered sacrifice to Hercules and made festival in his name, in thanksgiving for delivering them from the giant .

The Story of Atalanta

The story of the woman hero Atalanta exists in both Greek and Roman sources. There is some confusion about certain details of her story: for example, her father's name is given variously as Iasus, Maenalus, or Schoeneus, and the suitor who defeated her in the footrace to win her hand as either Melanion or Hippomenes depending on which ancient author is being consulted. All authors, however, are in agreement that Atalanta was fearsomely skilled and athletic, even more so than the men around her. Unfortunately, we also see that even the heroic Atalanta cannot escape the patriarchal dictates of the Greek and Roman cultures, since ultimately, she must be tamed by a man who wins her not by his own skill and strength-which are less than hers-but by cheating.

It is interesting that in his retelling of the tale, Ovid has Melanion and Atalanta meet at the end of one of her races, where she finds herself falling in love with him against her will, whereas in other versions the young man merely wins her and carts her off to be his bride. But it seems to have been important to Ovid that Atalanta return Melanion's affections, which makes her distraction over the golden fruit rather less diminishing than in other versions of the tale.

The Tale of Atalanta's Birth and Upbringing

Once there was a king of Arcadia named Schoeneus who had a lovely wife named Clymene. Schoeneus' realm was a fair one, and at peace with all its neighbors, but for all that Schoeneus was discontented, for he had no heir to his throne. Finally, Clymene found herself with child, and Schoeneus prayed to all the gods that she might bear him a fine, healthy son, but when the time came, Clymene was delivered of a female child, who was named Atalanta. Enraged that his hopes had thus been dashed, Schoeneus took the babe and exposed her on the hillside of Mount Parthenium, expecting that there she would die either from cold or from thirst, or be eaten by wild beasts.

But the plan of Schoeneus was thwarted when a she-bear came upon the little baby and allowed her to suck from her own teats. While Atalanta nursed upon the she-bear, a party of hunters came up the mountainside. The bear ran away at the hunters' approach, leaving the babe lying there. The hunters took pity on Atalanta, and brought her to their own homestead, where they raised her as their own,

teaching her the skills of the chase. Atalanta grew tall and strong, becoming a fine archer and deadly with a javelin, and swifter than any other creature that went on foot. She delighted in the hunt and in footraces. Many young men challenged her to races, thinking it strange and shameful that a woman should have the victory over a man, but however they tried, none could best her: Atalanta outstripped them all .

The Calydonian Boar

Now, at that time Oeneus was king of a land called Calydon, which was being ravaged by a monstrous wild boar. The boar had been sent by the goddess Diana, who was furious that during a time of festival the Calydonians had made offerings to all the other gods but had neglected to make even the simplest sacrifice of incense on her own altar. The boar was as big as a full-grown bull, and its tusks as long as an elephant's and sharper than a warrior's blade. One blast of its breath could shrivel every growing thing in its path. The boar raged up and down the country, devastating the fields and withering the crops. Grapes on their vines were torn down and trampled, while the stately olive trees with their pallid leaves and fine fruit were toppled and the branches all broken. The people in the countryside fled to the city, seeking the protection of the walls, but even there they did not feel safe, for surely the gates would be no proof against a monster such as this.

Meleager, son of King Oeneus, called together a picked band of heroes to hunt and kill the boar. Among them were Theseus who slew the Minotaur and his friend Pirithous; the sons of Aeacus, brave Telamon and Peleus, father of mighty Achilles; Laertes, father of wandering, crafty Ulysses; and many others besides. Never had such a hunt been called. When Atalanta heard of Meleager's plan, she took up her bow and quiver went to Calydon straight away, taking her place among the great men who also had come to seek glory. Meleager looked upon her and thought that he would truly be the most fortunate of all men if she would but love him.

But there was no time for courting: the great beast must be slain. Off the hunters went into the forest, their pack of hounds snuffing and baying before them. Soon they were on the track of the great boar, which they flushed from its hiding place in a marshy dell. Some of the hunters cast their javelins: some missed the boar entirely, others struck but passed harmlessly through its mane of bristles. The boar attacked, swinging its scything tusks left and right. Some hunters it caught, slicing open their thighs with sword-like strokes. Some managed to escape by climbing trees. Ever the hounds leapt baying at

the great beast, and ever they leapt away as it charged at them.

Finally, the boar turned in flight, heading into the thick woods. Atalanta fitted an arrow to her bow and took careful aim. She let fly, and the arrow grazed the boar's broad back, then lodged in a place behind its ear. Meleager rejoiced at Atalanta's skill. "First blood to Atalanta!" he cried. "A fine shot that shall surely be rewarded!"

But the other hunters felt ashamed since it was not they but a mere woman who achieved first blood, and so they redoubled their efforts to find and kill the boar, thinking to bolster their manhood in that way. One man, Ancaeus by name, was armed with a great axe. "See here the weapon of a man!" he cried. "Greater deeds shall it do than any woman-wielded bow."

And so Ancaeus went to the front of the pack of hunters, who were hot in pursuit of the fleeing boar. Suddenly, the great monster turned so quickly, it seemed to swivel on the spot. The boar turned, and rushed at Ancaeus, who awaited its charge, axe raised. He was poised to strike, yet never did the blow descend, for before Ancaeus could swing his axe, the boar impaled him through the groin with its tusk, ripping out his bowels. Thus, do the gods repay the sin of pride.

Next Theseus and Pirithous tried their luck. Pirithous hurled his javelin, and though it seemed well-aimed, it became caught in the boughs of an oak-tree, and so missed its mark. Theseus then made his own throw, and though it was a cast worthy of such a hero it also went wide, impaling a luckless dog. Then Meleager made two casts. The first fell short, burying its point deep into the soft loam; but the second shot was true, and lodged itself in the rock-hard back of the great monster.

Maddened with pain and pouring blood all over the forest floor, the boar turned and aimed itself at Meleager. But the young hero was ready with another spear. Standing fast, he met the boar's charge. On the beast came, paying no heed to the shining spearhead held directly in its path. Meleager braced himself and was nearly driven off his feet with the shock of the boar's onslaught. But the spear was made well and Meleager was strong: the boar shuddered to a halt and fell to the ground, dead, the prince's spear pushed deep into its shoulder and down into its heart by the force of its own onrush.

All the hunters cheered Meleager's victory and came to dip the points of their own spears into the shining blood. Then Meleager said, "Come, Atalanta! For this victory also is yours by right of first blood. I therefore give to you the spoils of the hunt." And so Meleager dressed the boar and gave the head and the skin to the Arcadian huntress,

who reached out to receive them gladly.

The other hunters were angered and embarrassed by this, that a woman should enjoy the spoils and have honor above themselves. Two of them, a pair of brothers and the uncles of Meleager, stepped forward and snatched away the hide, saying, "This does not belong to you. Think not that you should take what is given only because of lovesickness."

Enraged by their presumption, Meleager cried out, "You dare to usurp my right to give, and Atalanta's to receive? Here then is the reward for those who scorn deeds in favor of words."

And so Meleager took his spear and thrust it first into one man and then into the other, and so they perished. When their bodies were brought home, their sister, Althaea, who was Meleager's mother, mourned them greatly, and vowed revenge against Meleager. Now, when Meleager was but an infant, a prophecy had been made that he would live only as long as a certain piece of kindling then on the fire had not been turned to ash. Althaea had snatched the burning brand out of the fire and quenched it in a pail of water that was standing hard by, thus sparing Meleager's life. But now she took up that brand, which she had ever kept apart from the others lest the prophecy come true. She lit a new fire in the hearth and threw the brand upon it. In another part of the city, Meleager felt his body begin to burn from the inside out. The prince writhed in agony for the time that the brand was on the fire, and as it finally passed into ash, his spirit left his body and went to the Land of the Dead. So passed Meleager of Calydon .

Atalanta's Race

Atalanta mourned Meleager, for she also had found him pleasing, and no other man had ever acted towards her the way he had done in the hunt. Wanting to know whether another such man might be found, she went to an oracle to see what her fate might be. The oracle said,

Bonds of wedlock be thy bane

Yet flight from man shall be in vain;

For try as thou might thou canst not flee,

And once wed, thyself ne'er more shall be.

Atalanta then made a solemn vow that she never would take a husband, and so went back to the forest where for a time she lived as a huntress, wild and free. Eventually, however, she learned who her true parents were, and went to live with them.

Now, Atalanta was a woman most beautiful, and suitor after suitor came to her seeking her hand. Schoeneus urged her to choose one of them, but she spurned all of them with a challenge. Finally, Schoeneus asked, "What might I do to convince you to take a husband?"

Atalanta replied, "Whoever can best me in a footrace, him will I wed, but if I am the victor, the losers forfeit their lives."

Schoeneus agreed to Atalanta's terms, and so a place was marked out for the contest to be held. Such was the allure of Atalanta that many men dared try their fleetness against hers, but no man who made the attempt ever returned home again, for none of them ever won.

The tale of Atalanta's challenge began to spread through the land and came to the ears of a young man called Melanion. "How is it," thought Melanion, "that young men are so willing to risk their lives for a mere woman? What is it about Atalanta that drives them so?"

And so Melanion resolved to watch one of those contests. He arrived at the racing course and took his place among the other spectators. The young men all stood at the starting line, stretching and warming their bodies for the race. And then Atalanta arrived. So graceful was she, so fair of form, so strong and lithe, that Melanion felt the breath taken from him, and thus he knew exactly why those young men tried their luck against her, and he resolved to do the same if none were victor in this race. The runners were called to take their places and the judge gave the signal. Atalanta and the young men darted forth and ran with all their might towards the finish line. Melanion watched, rapt, as Atalanta outstripped every one of the young men and crossed the finish line first, with many lengths between her and the nearest contender .

While the losers were rounded up and taken to their fate, Melanion fought his way through the crowd until he came face to face with Atalanta. "O Princess, stay a moment!" he said. "Race with me, for I alone am worthy of the contest. My father is Megareus of Onchestus, and his grandsire was none other than Neptune himself."

Atalanta stared at the youth and found herself warming to him. For he was very beautiful of face and manly of form, and he pleased her more than any other suitor ever had done. She found she desired very much that he not contest with her, for she was not sure she could bear to see him defeated and therefore executed.

"Why do you seek something you know will be in vain, and thus forfeit your life?" she said. "Go from here, for the fates have decreed that I should not wed. Surely there are many young women who would be honored to be your bride; go and seek among them, for here

you will find only death.”

But Melanion persisted, and the other spectators who heard the conversation started demanding a race. Soon Schoeneus was told that another suitor had presented himself, and so the king demanded that the race be held, according to the terms of the challenge.

Melanion was brought to the starting line, where he prayed to fair Venus to give him aid. The goddess looked kindly upon the youth and put into his hands three golden apples from one of her own orchards. Atalanta soon joined him on the racecourse. The signal was given, and the runners were off.

Never had any man given Atalanta such a race. Side by side they ran. Atalanta gazed at the face of the panting youth and wondered whether she should simply let him win, for she found that he had conquered her heart. But then she steeled herself with new resolve and began pulling ahead.

Melanion ran at Atalanta's side, feet pounding and heart racing. He saw that she was beginning to pass him, and so he took one of the apples and tossed it aside across her path. Seeing the bright, shining thing, Atalanta swerved in her course to go and fetch the apple, giving Melanion a little advantage. But this did not last long, for soon she had caught up to him and again they ran shoulder to shoulder. Again, Melanion tossed aside one of the apples. Again, Atalanta went to fetch it and then caught back up with the youth.

The finish line was approaching, and Atalanta had caught up to Melanion every time he threw an apple. With one last prayer to blessed Venus, he tossed the last apple to the side and then sprinted his very hardest straight at the finish line. Atalanta charged after the shining fruit. She bent to pick it up and saw that Melanion had pulled well ahead of her. Putting on the greatest burst of speed yet, Atalanta tore after the young man, but it was too late: her loss of time and the burden of the apples slowed her, and she crossed the line second.

And so Melanion and Atalanta were wed, and they had a little time of joy together, but alas, it was too brief, for Melanion had neglected to make an offering to Venus in thanksgiving for his victory, and the goddess did not forgive this slight. One day as the young couple were out hunting together, they came across an old, abandoned temple deep in the forest, a place that was sacred to the goddess Cybele. Venus put into the hearts and bodies of Melanion and Atalanta a desire to lie together, and so they went into the temple, where they delighted in one another.

Cybele saw the desecration of her temple and was enraged that two

mortals would dare such an offense. At first, she thought to kill them outright, but then decided upon a better fate. Atalanta and Melanion found their teeth lengthening into fangs, and tawny hair growing all over their bodies. Shaggy manes sprouted from heads and chests; they went on all fours, their fingernails lengthening into claws, and long tails waving about behind them. In the form of lions, they were taken by Cybele and harnessed to her chariot, and this was the end of mortal Atalanta and Melanion.

The Quest for the Golden Fleece

The story of Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece fired the Greek and Roman imagination alike. The epic voyage of the Argo, manned by a collection of the greatest heroes known to the ancient imagination, takes us on a magical tour of the ancient world, both real and mythical, a place peopled with kings and queens, gods and goddesses, monsters, and impossible obstacles. The scale of these adventures, the action, and the characters and creatures we meet as the story unfolds likewise have served as inspiration for modern filmmakers such as the pioneering Ray Harryhausen, whose work on the 1963 film Jason and the Argonauts, among others, remains a touchstone in the history of special effects.

Likewise, the story of Jason's betrayal of Medea and her revenge upon him and his children continues to fascinate modern audiences. Over two thousand years after it was first written, "Medea" by the Greek playwright Euripides continues to be staged, including a prominent run on Broadway in 1994 starring Dame Diana Rigg in the title role.

Once there was a king in Iolcus named Pelias. He sat his throne uneasily, for he had taken it unlawfully from his half-brother, Aeson. Pelias therefore took care to slay all others who might have a claim to the throne, although he spared the life of Aeson.

Aeson had a baby son named Jason. Knowing that Pelias would try to kill the boy, Aeson brought him in secret to the centaur Chiron to be fostered, while he and his wife pretended to the king that Jason had died. Chiron raised Jason as his own, teaching him all his arts of healing, hunting, and weaponry, of how to read the stars, and how to sing and play the lyre.

In all the years that Jason was with Chiron, still Pelias sat the throne of Iolcus. As his reign continued, Pelias grew satisfied that he must have destroyed any challengers who might come forth. But still there was a nagging doubt in the back of his mind, and so he went to see an oracle that she might tell him what the future held .

"O mighty king," said the oracle, "nothing a man holds is ever held for

long, for change is a thing ordained by the gods. Sit you on the throne today, but in the fulness of time you also will be overthrown, by a man wearing a single sandal.”

Thus, Pelias knew that his days of rule were numbered.

Not long after Pelias heard the prophecy of the oracle, Chiron looked upon Jason and saw that although his cheeks and chin were only beginning to be downy, he was tall and strong and well-trained, and ready to seek his own fortune in the world. He told Jason of his parentage, and that his true home was in the kingdom of Iolcus. With Chiron's blessing, Jason therefore determined to set out for Iolcus, to see whether he might wrest his birthright back from the wicked Pelias. On his way, he came to a swift-running stream, swollen with recent rain, for which there was no bridge, and no ford for several miles in either direction. At the edge of the stream stood an old woman with long white hair. Her gnarled hand grasped a long staff. When Jason approached, he asked, “Might I be of help, Mother?”

“Yes,” replied the woman. “I must cross this stream, but I fear I have not the strength to do so.”

Jason offered to take her across on his back, and the woman gratefully accepted. The young man bent low so that the crone might clamber up and put her arms around his neck, and in this wise he stepped out into the rushing water. It was fortunate that he was both young and very strong, for even had he been unburdened, it would have taken a good deal of strength to battle that current. In the end, he reached the other bank safely with his passenger, having lost only one of his sandals to the torrent. Jason set the old woman down gently and turned to bid her farewell. But no longer was she a withered old crone: before Jason stood a tall and stately woman, crowned with gold and in shining robes. Instantly Jason knew her for the goddess Juno. He knelt before her, and she said to him, “Kindness does not go unrewarded. Go forth to your destiny, knowing that you have my favor.” And when Jason looked up, the goddess was gone.

Jason then made his way to Iolcus, where he found the people were attending a religious festival. On that day, it was customary for the king to sacrifice a bull to the gods, and when Jason learned that this was where Pelias might be found, he made his way to the temple and placed himself at the front of the crowd. Pelias completed the sacrifice, and as he turned to leave he saw the young stranger standing amongst his people, a stranger who was wearing only one sandal. Pelias hesitated only a moment, although within he quailed: surely this was the one-sandaled stranger the oracle had warned him about. Turning to his guards, Pelias instructed them to bring the one-

sandaled youth to his palace, where he was to be treated as a guest.

Since it was a festival day, Pelias held a great banquet, to which he invited young Jason. Pelias gave his nephew much good food and even more good wine. Then he said, "I know why you have come, young son of Aeson, but think not that the kingdom will be yours merely for the asking. I will only cede the throne willingly to the one who brings to me the Golden Fleece of Colchis. Think carefully: will you go from here and lead a life of safety, or will you undertake this challenge, in which you might either lose that life or gain a throne?"

Jason boldly said that he accepted the quest. In the morning, the first thing he did was to go to Dodona, where there was an ancient oak tree sacred to Juno. The tree was an oracle and had the power of speech. Jason made sacrifice to Juno at the nearby temple, after which the tree instructed him to saw off one of its limbs and carve it into the figurehead for his ship, which Argus, son of Arestor, built under the direction of wise Minerva. When the ship was complete and the figurehead affixed, Jason found that the figurehead also had the power of speech, just as its parent tree did, and Jason named this fine ship the *Argo*, after its builder.

But no simple quest was this, for there were many dangers on the journey to Colchis, and many more ringed around the Fleece itself: no hero who had attempted to take it had ever come back alive. Jason therefore called together the mightiest band of heroes ever assembled. Hercules came with his nephew Iolaus at Jason's beck, as did Orpheus with his lyre. Laertes father of Ulysses there was, and Castor and Pollux. Achilles' father Peleus came to join the mighty crew, as did Theseus who slew the Minotaur, and fleet Atalanta with her bow. Many others besides came to Iolcus to sail with Jason, some fifty heroes in all.

Knowing that his youth told against him, Jason offered to let the crew choose their own captain. The younger ones among them said that Hercules should do this duty, but the great hero said that he would not, since the one who called them together was the rightful leader. As one, the crew agreed that Jason was to lead them, and Jason accepted that charge manfully. Then at Jason's command, they set about provisioning the ship and choosing lots for places at the rowing benches.

When all was made ready, the Argonauts-for thus the crew of the *Argo* were called-went to the temple inside the city to make the proper sacrifices to the gods that they might have a good journey. After that was done Jason said farewell to his parents, who had rejoiced at his return, but now sorrowed to see him leave them so soon. All needful

things thus completed, the heroes walked together from the temple down to the harbor, the people of Iolcus cheering them all the while.

On the shore, the heroes offered another sacrifice of bulls to Apollo, giving to him the thigh bones and the rich fat that were his due, with libations in plenty. Then they roasted the flesh of the bulls and set about feasting and making merry there on the shore, with sweet music and song provided by Orpheus himself. With one last libation poured out to mighty Zeus, the Argonauts took their rest, and in the morning launched their ship into the waves.

With a fair wind in the sails they traveled across the sea, the rowers hauling manfully at their oars to the rhythm of Orpheus' song. As they sailed past the land where Chiron had his abode, the centaur himself came down to the shore to shout a blessing upon their journey, bringing with him little Achilles, that he might wave to his dear father, who had placed the boy in Chiron's care.

And so, on the *Argo* sped across the wine-dark sea, with a fair wind in her sail and the strongest of rowers at her oars, landing at whiles to take on supplies of food and water, and to rest, until after several they came to the land of the Mysians, where they were made welcome and told to take whatever they might need for their journey. Now, Hercules had riven his oar earlier that day; the slender oak was not able withstand his might and the shaft had snapped in half mid-stroke. Therefore, the hero went into the forest that stood near where the companions had beached their ship, searching for a tree he might use to make an oar that matched his strength. The others, meanwhile, gathered wood to make cookfires on the beach, and a youth named Hylas, who had been fostered by Hercules since he was a boy, went to a nearby spring to draw fresh water. When Hylas bent over the water to fill his ewer, a nymph looked up and saw him and became enamored of him. She grasped Hylas around the neck and pulled him into the water to be her husband.

An Argonaut named Polyphemus heard the boy cry out and went running to see what had happened. When he got to the stream, there he found the ewer Hylas had brought with him, but the boy was missing. In vain Polyphemus called for Hylas. Thinking that perhaps the lad had fallen prey to robbers, Polyphemus began to search for him, and so encountered Hercules, who had found a suitable tree and uprooted it to take back to the camp and fashion into a new oar. When Hercules heard what had happened, he went mad with fear and rage. He dropped the tree and set out with Polyphemus to see whether they might find the boy.

Back at the camp, a fair wind was rising. The helmsman Tiphys called

to the Argonauts, telling them to board quickly that they might use the wind to advantage. The heroes all rushed to launch the ship. Pushing it out into the surf, they scrambled aboard, rushing to set the sail and bend to their oars. In their hurry to catch the wind, they did not notice that three of their number were missing, until they were well away from shore. When they realized that Hercules, Polyphemus, and Hylas were not with them, the sailors fell to quarrelling. Telamon, brother of Peleas, was especially enraged, and accused Tiphys of having abandoned Hercules and the others on purpose. Telamon went to the helm and would have wrested it from the hands of Tiphys had others not held him back.

And so, the quarrel continued until there was a great surge of water athwart the ship, out of which rose Glaucus, a sea-god who had once been mortal but who had eaten an herb that gave him immortality, the tail of a fish instead of legs, and the gift of prophecy. The sailors all stopped shouting the instant Glaucus appeared, paying heed to the divine being who deigned speak with them.

“Have no fear for the companions you left behind,” said the sea-god, “for always was it fated by Zeus himself that they would not complete the journey with you. Young Hylas has been taken as a husband by a water-nymph, with whom he now lives in great contentment. It was to search for Hylas that Hercules and Polyphemus left the shore and did not return in time. But Hercules must return to Tiryns, to fulfill the labors his cousin Eurystheus sets for him, while Polyphemus is destined to found a new city in the land of the Mysians. So be of good cheer and go your way in peace with one another.” So saying, Glaucus disappeared beneath the waves .

When the sea-god had gone, Telamon made peace with Jason and with Tiphys, admitting his fault and asking forgiveness, which the others gladly gave. Then Argonauts took their benches once again, and set their sails, and with Tiphys at the helm resumed their quest. With a fair wind and strong backs at the oars the *Argo* shot across the wine-dark sea until at last they came to harbor in the kingdom of Thrace.

At that time, the king of Thrace was a man named Phineus, who suffered under a curse put on him by Zeus. For Phineus was a prophet, and would foretell the future of any who asked, whether it was the will of Zeus that they should know this or not. Zeus therefore cursed Phineus, letting him wither with age but not die, taking the sight from his eyes, but worst of all setting upon him a flock of Harpies, creatures having the heads and breasts of women but the wings and bodies of birds and emitting a loathsome stench, who would descend at every

meal and snatch away his food, sometimes taking all but other times taking only some, that Phineus might still live yet never have his fill. When Phineus heard the Argonauts walking past his palace, he went to the gates as quickly as his frail body might go, where he collapsed into the dust before the mighty heroes.

The heroes' hearts were overcome with pity for the old man. They helped him up and asked what was the cause of his woes. Phineus explained to them the curse of Zeus and said that it was fated that the Argonauts would be the ones to free him from it, especially the sons of Boreas, the god of the north wind. Jason and his companions readily agreed to help the aged king. Calais and Zetes, the sons of Boreas, pronounced themselves ready to do whatever was needful. Therefore, a feast was prepared and spread out for the king and his guests, to lure the Harpies to the palace. No sooner had the table been set than did those foul things arrive to snatch away the food and then fly off, swifter than any bird.

Calais and Zetes drew their swords and leapt to the chase. On and on they raced after the Harpies, for Zeus had granted them immortal endurance and speed. Once or twice they nearly caught the Harpies, but always the creatures managed to escape. At last the brothers came within a hairsbreadth of snatching the Harpies out of the sky and killing them, but Iris, a messenger of the gods, appeared to them and told them that the will of the gods was that the creatures might live, but also that Zeus had lifted the curse, and that Phineus might live out the rest of his life unmolested.

While the brothers were on the chase the Argonauts made sacrifice to the gods on behalf of Phineus. Then the king and his guests sat down to their feast, which Phineus was finally able to eat in peace. When everyone had eaten and drunk their fill, and while they waited for the sons of Boreas to return, Phineas spoke with the Argonauts, telling them many things they needed to know in order to get to Colchis safely, for the sea between Thrace and Colchis was full of dangers that no ship had ever escaped. Just as Phineas finished his tale, Calais and Zetes returned, breathless with their long hunt and the journey back to Thrace. Everyone rejoiced to hear that the Harpies had been driven away for good and that the curse had been lifted by the grace of Zeus .

In the morning, the Argonauts made sacrifice to Apollo, and again they shared a feast with their host before departing. When farewells had been said, and thanks given between host and guests alike, the heroes launched their splendid ship and bent strong backs to the oars while a fair wind filled their white sail.

They sailed on in peace for part of the day, but soon the air was filled

with a strange sound of bird calls. Looking into the sky, the Argonauts saw a flock of bronze birds flying towards them. The birds shot feathers from their wings and tails at the sailors, the sharp bronze wounding them. Arrows and swords were of no avail, since no weapon could pierce the metal of which the birds were made. Jason sought the advice of the magic figurehead made from the branch of the oracular tree. The figurehead said that the birds could not be killed, but they might be frightened away if the Argonauts made sufficient noise. Jason and some of his companions therefore took up their swords and shields, and began clashing these weapons against one another, making a hideous din, while the other heroes strained at the oars to get them away from the birds. As the figurehead had said, the birds were frightened by the noise of the clashing arms, and so the *Argo* was able finally to escape from them.

After a time, the companions came to a narrow strait that Phineus had warned them about. For on either side of this strait were two hidden rocks that would rise up out of the sea and clash together whenever a ship tried to sail between them. Phineus had told Jason that he might discover whether the passage was possible by first allowing a dove to fly over the strait: if the dove were able to outfly the stones, then perhaps by dint of rowing and seamanship the *Argo* also would be able to pass. But if the dove were to perish between the stones, then it would be better for the Argonauts to find a different path to Colchis, since that also would be a sign that the gods denied them passage through the strait.

Jason therefore took a dove, as Phineus had advised, and released it. As the dove approached the strait, the waters on either side began to roil and foam. Two huge rocks pushed their way up and out of the water and then drove towards one another with a speed not to be believed for two such gigantic and heavy things. The Argonauts waited with bated breath to see the fate of the dove as the rocks collided with a deafening crash, then parted and subsided beneath the waves. A cheer went up from every throat as the heroes saw that the dove had flown through unharmed, save for the loss of a few tail feathers.

The Argonauts all bent their backs to the oars, with skillful Tiphys ever ready at the rudder. They rowed towards the strait, and on Jason's command pulled at the oars as they had never pulled before. Never had any ship moved over the waves as quickly as did the *Argo*, and even so she very nearly failed to shoot the gap as the rocks closed in. She was saved not only by the strength of the oarsmen but also by the seamanship of Tiphys, who guided the ship down the face of a wave made by the rocks. Just as the rocks clashed together, Minerva

came to the aid of the companions, holding the rocks the slightest bit apart as the *Argo* surged through the last few lengths of the strait. When the goddess let go, the giant stones crashed together. Although the ship was still seaworthy and not one sailor had been injured or lost, the *Argo* did not escape unscathed: the fury of the rocks' collision caught the end of her rudder and smashed it, just as the dove had lost her feathers in her flight through the strait. But once the *Argo* had navigated the strait, the curse that had been put on those waters was lifted, and never more did the rocks ever move from their bed.

Rejoicing that they had survived that deadly peril, but weary beyond measure from their effort, the Argonauts sailed to the next friendly island they could find, and there they rested for three days before continuing their journey. When they were ready, the Argonauts set sail again, and after many adventures with friend and foe alike they arrived at Colchis, where next they would need to go to King Aeëtes to see whether they might try for the Golden Fleece. But night was already falling as they arrived, so Jason and his companions deemed it best to eat and sleep and decide what was best to be done in the morning.

The Argonauts awoke as rosy Dawn colored the sky. They took a hasty meal, then sat in their ship to take counsel. Jason said, "It is my quest to go before Aeëtes and gain the fleece, but we are all companions in this venture and therefore each one should say what they think about what I purpose to do. I think it best if we go to Aeëtes and ask him for the Fleece before trying to get it by force, for the Fleece is his possession and we are guests in his land. Therefore, let us behave as good guests, and see whether we might have the Fleece by gift. If he refuses us, only then we may plan what else may be done to achieve our goal. Are we agreed in this, or no?" And every Argonaut said that what Jason advised was wise and well considered and should be done thus.

Now, the Golden Fleece had not always been in Colchis, although Aeëtes possessed it and counted it among his many treasures. The Fleece came from a golden ram that had rescued Phrixus and Helle, who were the twin children of King Athamas and the nymph Nephele. But Athamas deserted Nephele, and took up with a woman named Ino, who hated Phrixus and Helle and conspired to kill them. The gods took pity on the children, sending winged Mercury to bring them a golden-fleeced ram to ride to safety. The children mounted the ram, and it flew through the air, taking them away from their wicked stepmother. Phrixus held tight, but Helle became frightened and loosed her hold, falling into the strait that came to bear her name, the Hellespont. The ram carried Phrixus safely to Colchis, where Phrixus

sacrificed the animal, hanging its fleece on a tree and setting a fearsome dragon to guard it. King Aeëtes made Phrixus most welcome, giving his daughter Chalciope to Phrixus to be his wife. Together they had four sons who, when they were grown, went to the realm of Athamas to claim their birthright through their father.

When Phrixus died an aged man, the four youths took ship to return to Colchis, but a fierce storm sank their ship, and so clinging to the rent timbers the youths came to land on an island where the Argonauts had beached for the night. The sons of Phrixus saw the Argonauts' camp, and so went to them to ask for aid, which Jason and his crew gladly gave. And so it was that when Jason chose those who would go with him in the embassy to Aeëtes that the sons of Phrixus accompanied him, since their mother was still resident in the palace of the king, who was their grandfather. Telamon and Augeias from among the Argonauts went also .

The embassy soon came into the courtyard of the palace, where Medea, also a daughter of Aeëtes and priestess of Hecate, beheld them. She let out a glad cry when she saw the sons of Phrixus and, hearing this, Chalciope came running to see what was the matter. Embracing her sons with joy, she scolded them for being so long away. Soon they were joined by King Aeëtes himself and other members of the royal household. As guests and hosts alike thronged in the courtyard, Medea, daughter of King Aeëtes and priestess of Hecate, beheld the young hero from Iolcus and, through the power of the goddess Venus, a burning love for him sprang up in her breast.

King Aeëtes bade his servants prepare a meal for his household and their guests, and when the feasting was done, King Aeëtes asked Jason what it was that had brought him and his friends to Colchis. Jason explained that his quest was to take the Golden Fleece back to King Pelias in Iolcus so that he might claim his rightful inheritance. Aeëtes listened to Jason's tale, and was wroth that any stranger should attempt to deprive him of that treasure. Thinking to dissuade the young hero from his quest, or else see him die in the attempt, the king said, "Son of Aeson, the Fleece will be yours only if you show yourself worthy of it. To do this, first you must yoke the fire-breathing bulls on the Plain of Mars that sits hard by my palace and, having done that, plow that field and sow the furrows with dragon's teeth. From the teeth will spring an army, and all of these warriors must you defeat. When that is accomplished, you must next go to the Grove of Mars where the Fleece hangs from the bough of a sacred tree. The Fleece is guarded by a dragon most fierce, and him you must pass before the Fleece can be yours. Do you accept this challenge?"

Jason said that he did, although within he despaired of being able to surmount any of those obstacles. The feast ended, Jason and his companions returned to their ship, where the son of Aeson told the assembled Argonauts what had passed in the hall of Aeëtes. Then he said to them, "I had thought when I called you together that I would have need of your valor for the gaining of the Fleece itself, but this I find must be my quest alone. Go to your rest therefore, but be ready to meet whatever chance might bring your way, whether I succeed or fail, for Aeëtes is not a friendly man, and I fear he does not wish us well."

Jason's friends did as he bid them, but Jason himself went into a little grove of trees not far from where the *Argo* had been beached, for he wished to be alone while he bethought himself how to conquer the dread beasts he must face on the morrow. As he paced about the grove, he was startled when the figure of a young woman slid through the trees towards him.

"Fear not," said the woman quietly. "It is but I, Medea, daughter of King Aeëtes. I know how those beasts may be defeated, and I have come to give you aid."

Jason said, "Why do you risk yourself thus? Surely your father will punish you harshly should he discover what you do."

"I care not," said Medea, "for I would rather die myself than see you perish beneath the horns of the bulls, or in the maw of the dragon."

"Tell me then, what I must do," said the hero .

Medea handed him a flask of oil and told him that he must put it all over his body, and that this would calm the bulls and make them patient to the yoke, and another potion that would cast the dragon into a deep sleep. Also, she handed him a magic helm to use against the army that would rise from the teeth of the dragon. For Medea was a sorceress, having learned the making of medicines and drugs and poisons from the goddess Hecate herself.

Jason wondered that the daughter of Aeëtes would do all these things for him, and at such risk. He looked upon her and saw that she was lovely and gracious, and deeply troubled that he might die in his quest. Then he saw that she loved him, and a love for her also sprang up in his own breast.

"Priestess," said Jason, "I cannot give you thanks enough for your aid. But this I do promise you: if I am the victor tomorrow, I will shelter you from the wrath of Aeëtes, for I will it that you shall return with me to my home, to be my wife."

Medea rejoicing, returned unseen to the palace, while Jason went back to his companions to take his rest. In the morning, Jason anointed himself with the oil Medea had given him. He put on the helmet and tucked the phial of soporific into his robes. Thus prepared, Jason and the Argonauts went to the Plain of Mars, where they found King Aeëtes and his court gathered to watch the contest. Jason and his friends paid their respects to the king, who handed him a bag full of dragon's teeth. When all had taken their places at the side of the field, Jason went forth to meet the bulls.

Now, these were no ordinary bulls, but creatures wrought by Vulcan himself as a gift to Aeëtes. Their hooves and mouths were of bronze, and they breathed forth fire and smoke. King Aeëtes gave the word, and the bulls were loosed onto the plain where Jason stood alone. With hoofbeats that smote the earth like giant blacksmith's hammers, making the ground shake beneath Jason's feet, the bulls came roaring out onto the plain. They looked about and saw that a lone man stood in the middle of their domain and ran towards him. All who watched gasped as the great beasts checked their rush to stand calmly in front of Jason, who gently grasped their horns and stroked their necks: the ointment given him by Medea calmed the bulls and made them willing to do what Jason asked. Jason led them to where the plow had been set, a plow fashioned also by Vulcan, with a share of pure adamant. Meekly the bulls turned at Jason's behest, and meekly they stood while he harnessed them.

Then Jason set about plowing the earth with fine, straight furrows, and into these furrows Jason tossed behind him a scattering of dragon's teeth. When all the teeth had been sown, Jason released the great beasts from the plow with thanks and sent them back to the herdsmen who cared for them. Another gasp arose from the spectators as a strange crop began to spring from the furrows Jason had plowed: great warriors, fully armed, were growing up out of the ground like corn.

When all the warriors were full-made, they noticed Jason standing and watching them. Putting their shields and spears to the ready, they gave a shout and started to march towards the stranger. Jason plucked the helm from his head and threw it into the midst of the army, striking one of the warriors on the head. The warrior cried out that one of his fellows must have hit him and started laying about him with his spear. The others denied the charge and began fighting their brothers as well. Soon the whole army was at war with itself, and in a very short time the warriors had all been slain. Just as the warriors had sprung from the earth, they were taken back into it: away they sank back into the turned furrows, now trodden with the steps of

warlike feet and soaked with blood, and they were never seen again.

The last task that remained was to deal with the dragon that guarded the Fleece. A great, scaly thing, the dragon coiled itself round and round the Tree of Mars and slew all who came near with razor-sharp teeth as long as a man's arm and claws like great scythes. The dragon opened its eyes as Jason approached. It watched him warily as he softly strode towards the tree. The dragon raised its head as though to begin uncoiling itself, or to let out a belch of fire at the hero, but before it could attack Jason sprinkled on it the potion Medea had given him. The dragon put its head back down and closed its eyes, and from its throat came a contented snore: the potion had put the great beast into a deep sleep. Stepping carefully over the dragon's coils, Jason reached up and pulled the Fleece down from the tree.

Taking Medea by the hand, Jason went back to the *Argo* with his companions, where they took ship with all haste, for they did not trust Aeëtes to let them go easily and wanted to give him no time to assemble a host to stop them. Although the king did make ready a ship and did give chase to the *Argo*, he was not able to catch her, and so Jason and his friends escaped unscathed, and soon returned triumphant to Iolcus, after many other adventures.

One of the first things Jason did upon his return was to visit his father. Jason was greatly saddened to see that the old man had become weak and withered in his absence, when Jason had hoped to restore him to his rightful throne after presenting the Fleece to Pelias. Jason therefore went to Medea and asked her whether her magical skill would be great enough to restore Aeson's youth, and whether she would do this task for him. Medea agreed that she would.

First the sorceress made many sacrifices, to Hecate and to other gods, and then brewed a potion with magical herbs and powders. She then slit the old man's throat and let the blood run into the bowl to mix with the potion, which she both poured into the wound and gave him to drink. The wound in Aeson's neck closed of his own accord, and soon he had regained the body and vigor of a man in the prime of life.

The story of the restoration of Aeson spread through the land, and the daughters of Pelias came to Medea begging her to do the same for their own aged sire. Medea agreed, but with mischief in mind, for she bethought her to have revenge on the old king for his misdeeds against Jason's father. Medea pretended to prepare the potion but used herbs and powders that were ineffective. She then told the daughters to chop their father into little pieces and boil him in a pot, into which they should pour the false potion. The daughters did so, and when their father did not arise from the pot a youthful man, their

brother Acastus expelled Jason and Medea from Iolcus .

Jason and Medea went into exile in Corinth, where they lived for many years in happiness together and had two children. But after a time, the king of Corinth wished to make alliance with Jason, and so offered his daughter Glauce to the hero to be his bride, if he would but divorce Medea. Agreeing that the alliance was desirable, Jason divorced Medea and married Glauce.

Medea was overcome with pain and jealousy by Jason's betrayal. First, she steeped a robe in poison, and then presented it to Glauce as though it were a wedding gift. When Glauce put the robe on, the poison seeped into her body. She began to writhe in agony. Glauce's father went to help her, but when he touched the robe, he too was poisoned, and so they both perished. That revenge accomplished, Medea slew both of her children, then mounted into her chariot drawn by dragons, which had been a gift from her grandfather, the sun-god Helios. In it she went to Athens, where she married again and began a new life.

Before she departed, Medea left a message saying that just as the *Argo* had been the tool of Jason's success, so it would be the death of him. Jason, bereft of not one but two brides and both his children, lived in Corinth in sadness. One day, he thought to recapture happy memories of his youth, and so went to the harbor where the hulk of the *Argo* , now decayed with years and lack of use, had been left upon the sand. Jason wrapped himself in his cloak and climbed into the rotting ship. He went to sleep under the mast, but while he slept, a piece of the spar broke loose and tumbled down upon the hero's head, killing him. Thus ended Jason Aesonides, hero of the *Argo* and captor of the Golden Fleece.

PART III: STORIES FROM OVID'S *METAMORPHOSES*

The Creation of the World

One of the greatest collections of Roman myth is the Metamorphoses by Ovid, which opens with the story of the creation of the world. Although Roman myth tracks with Greek in many respects, the creation story that Ovid tells is somewhat different from that presented by ancient Greek writers such as Hesiod. Whereas the Greeks saw Earth, the heavens, and other facets of creation as gods in themselves, that sort of anthropomorphism is missing from Ovid's myth. For Ovid, a single, unnamed creator-god puts the heavens and earth together, and peoples it with humans, animals, and all the other things that live in the world. Nor does Ovid explain the origins of the Roman pantheon: Jupiter, Saturn, and the rest simply appear on the scene and begin acting and ruling according to their various roles and attributes.

Here we also see an important difference between Greek religion and its Roman counterpart. In Greek mythology, Zeus violently overthrows his predecessor, Cronus, who then disappears from the pantheon. But Jupiter's supplantation of Saturn seems not to have been violent at all, and Saturn remained an important god worthy of reverence throughout the Roman period.

In the beginning, there was nothing but Chaos. The sun did not shine, nor did the moon wax and wane. Land, sea, and air all did exist, but they were all dark and shifting. Creation was not yet a place where living things might move, and do, and be.

And so it was until God came and put order into the universe. God separated the sea from the land, and the air from both of these, and gave the heavens their place and form above all the other things. God then rolled the world into a great orb and spread out the waters upon it. In some places, there was ocean; in others, rivers and streams. Out of the waters rose the land. God made plains and hills, mountains and valleys, and put upon these all manner of trees and growing things. In the air, God placed mist and fog and clouds; he made thunder and lightning, wind and rain, and each of the winds went to the corner of the world he liked best. Eurus went to the east, Zephyrus to the west, while cold Boreas went north and warm Auster to the lands of the south.

Once all things had been separated and put in their places, stars began to shine in the sky, and fishes to swim in the waters. Birds flew in the air, and animals roamed over the land. Human beings were created

last of all and given dominion over the earth. Prometheus it was, son of the Titan Iapetus, who first made these beings, molding them into god-like forms and making them to walk upright.

The first age of creation is called the Golden Age, for in it all beings did what is right and just without the need for laws or punishments. There were no weapons and no strife, and the earth provided food for all without need for oxen or plows, and without the labor of farmers and herdsmen. Milk flowed in the springs, and honey dripped from the comb. Spring was eternal upon the earth in this Age: never was there cold or heat immoderate, but always warmth and a gentle breeze, and the god Saturn ruled supreme over all creation.

But this age was not to last. Jupiter banished Saturn from the world, and took up the rule in his stead, and this was the beginning of the Silver Age. In this Age came the seasons, with the cold of winter and the heat of summer. The earth did not give forth food without labor: the people were obliged to till the earth and sow the grain, and the oxen strained at the plow. Next came the Age of Bronze, more difficult and lowly than Silver, and finally the Age of Iron, wherein all manner of evil came to pass. The people forgot how to live in peace with their fellows. Theft and lies, hate and war all spread across the earth. Land was not free to all who might wish to farm it, but was marked out with boundaries. Miners delved into the earth looking for the wealth that was there, iron and gems, and bright gold to covet and to hoard. And in all their labor and their greed, the people forgot the worship of the gods.

Jupiter looked down from his palace in the heavens and was displeased. He called to himself a council of the gods, and they came to his abode treading the path of the Milky Way, the divine road in the sky that leads to the home of great Jupiter himself.

Jupiter said to the assembled gods, "I have looked down upon the earth, and I see nothing but hatred and wrongdoing. The human race has forgotten all seemliness. They hoard and kill and lie and steal, they neglect the sacrifices and worship that we gods are due and that is their rightful duty. I purpose to destroy humankind, to wipe the earth of them, and begin afresh with a new race of people, one that will do right and give us the honor we deserve."

And so, Jupiter called to the winds and the waves, and bade them storm and blow. He called to Neptune, the god of the sea, and commanded him to free the waters from their courses and send them crashing over all the earth. The rivers and streams he called together and bade them overflow their banks. The waters rose swirling about the houses and temples. They inundated fields and reached into the

boughs of orchard trees. They crept up the sides of hills and filled the valleys .

The people took fright, and tried to flee, but the waters were too swift and too strong. Animals and birds alike were swept away. Only two people survived, Deucalion, a righteous man who neglected not the honor due the gods, clinging to his little boat with his dear wife, Pyrrha, a woman as honorable as her husband was righteous. For a time, they floated on the waters, lamenting that soon they, too, would die, but then their boat came to rest on the peak of Mount Parnassus, which alone was too lofty to be covered by the waves.

Jupiter heard the cries of Deucalion and Pyrrha and looked down upon them with pity. He calmed the storm, and with his might he made the waters recede. Soon all the world was restored, but now it was empty of life.

“What shall we do?” said Deucalion. “We have been spared for now, but the human race perishes when we do.”

And so, Deucalion wept for his aloneness, and Pyrrha wept with him. When their tears ceased, they made their way back to their city, and went first to the temple of Themis, goddess of justice. The temple walls were fouled with the passing of the flood, and the temple fires were quenched, but still Deucalion and Pyrrha entered and prostrated themselves before the goddess. They prayed with great piety to her for aid, and for a way to restore lost humanity.

The goddess heard their prayer and spoke to them, saying, “Cover your heads and loosen your robes, and throw the bones of your mother behind you.”

At first Pyrrha refused, saying that she would do no such impiety to the bones of the one that bore her, even if it were possible to find the grave in the wreckage of the flood. But then Deucalion said, “Oracles rarely speak plainly, my wife. Surely the goddess meant something else.”

Bending his thought to it and looking about at the wreckage the waters had brought into their city, Deucalion hit upon the answer: “It is not human bones the goddess bids us throw, but the bones of the Earth, who also is our mother. Quick, wife, let us veil our heads and loosen our robes, and then we shall take the stones that we find in our path and cast those behind us, as the goddess bids.”

And so Pyrrha and Deucalion made their way along the streets of their city, picking up stones and casting them over their shoulders. When the stones hit the ground behind them, they softened and began to

grow and change. Soon each stone Deucalion cast changed into the likeness of a man, while those Pyrrha threw changed into the likeness of a woman. And when the shaping was done, the gods gave the new beings breath and life.

As Deucalion and Pyrrha worked to restore humanity, Earth herself restored the animals and birds. Warmed by the sun, the mud and the slime brought in by the waters gave birth to all the creatures who had walked or crept or flown before the flood, and also many new beasts and birds besides. And thus, the world was renewed, and the race of humanity begun afresh .

The Punishments of the Gods

An important concept in Greek and Roman mythology is that of hubris, or overweening pride. In many Greco-Roman myths, pride that oversteps certain boundaries is always punished in creative and often disturbingly violent ways by the gods. Some of these stories function primarily as cautionary tales, warning humans not to think themselves the equals of the gods, while others also serve as just-so stories, explaining the origins of things like spiders.

Each of the stories presented here continues as part of our modern consciousness in one way or another. Arachne lends her name-which means “spider” in Greek-to our lexicon in the form of the word “arachnid,” meaning “spiderlike.” The story of Icarus is still used to warn against tempting fate; while we still refer to someone who is greedy or even simply excessively wealthy as a “Midas.” Finally, the beautiful Narcissus lends his name both to a sweet-scented flower in the daffodil family and to the mental condition of “narcissism,” an excessive focus on the self to the detriment of others. In that story we also learn how the echo came to be, existing first as a nymph cursed by Juno who then wasted away into nothing but a voice because of unrequited love.

The Tale of Arachne

In Colophon there lived a woman named Arachne, who had the greatest skill at the loom of any woman in the whole world. Her father, Idmon, was a master dyer, and he would dye the wool in all manner of bright colors for her to weave. People would come from miles around to watch Arachne spin the wool into thread, and embroider it into cloth, or work it on her loom. Even the nymphs would descend from their groves and spend hour upon hour gazing at Arachne at her work, as the cloth grew and shone in the dance of warp and weft.

“Surely Minerva taught her all she knew,” said everyone who saw

Arachne's work, for of all the gods, Minerva had the greatest skill at spinning and weaving, and none could rival her in heaven or on earth.

But Arachne scoffed at this, saying that even Minerva herself could not have taught such skill. "If Minerva thinks to challenge me," said Arachne, "let her come down here and prove it. I would pay any price to strive with her, even though I be bested at the end."

Hearing this, grey-eyed Minerva took the form of an old woman, white-haired and bent with the labor of years. She went to where Arachne sat at her loom and said, "You weave well, and you are right to seek fame among mortals for your skill. But listen now to the advice of age: do not think yourself the equal of a goddess, for that will bring you only ruin. Ask forgiveness of Minerva now for your forwardness, cease in your prideful boasting, and surely the goddess will show you mercy. "

But Arachne spurned the words of the old woman. "Age is no guarantee of wisdom. Go find someone else to preach to. Surely you have a daughter or daughter-in-law of your own who will heed your advice? If Minerva says she is the better weaver, then let her prove it. I await her convenience."

Suddenly the goddess threw off her disguise. Gone was the bent back and the withered hands. Gone was the white hair. "Behold!" said Minerva. "You have called me, and I have come."

The nymphs and women gathered there fell down before Minerva and worshipped her. Arachne alone did not bend her knee but stood before the goddess in challenge. Not a word more was exchanged between them, but both went to their looms and began to thread them. The contest had begun.

With care and skill, they laid the warp. Dexterously they threaded in the weft. Skilled fingers flew, working in the bright wool dyed in brilliant hues, purple and sky blue, blood red and pure white, and even gilded threads, shining in the sun. Slowly the cloth grew on the looms, slowly the design of the weavers took shape. Mortal woman and Minerva alike wove a story-cloth fit to robe a goddess.

On Minerva's loom grew the story of the city of Athens, of how Neptune and Minerva strove to have the honor of the city as its patron god, and how Minerva made grow the olive-tree that secured her victory over the god of the sea and gave the city its name. In each corner, the goddess wove the story of humans destroyed by the sin of hubris, and the border she made all of olive boughs.

Arachne wove many stories into her cloth, stories of women taken as

lovers by the gods, who themselves gave birth to divine children. Europa and the bull there was, and Leda and the swan, Danae with her golden shower, and many others besides, all bordered about with many flowers and twining ivy. No one who saw that cloth could see any flaw in it, not even Minerva herself.

The grey-eyed goddess could not contain her envy. She rent the cloth of Arachne in two and, taking up the wooden shuttle the mortal woman had used to defeat her, beat Arachne about the head with it. Arachne could not bear the insult of the goddess, and so went to a nearby tree and hanged herself. Seeing this, Minerva was filled with pity, and so instead of allowing Arachne to perish, changed her into a spider. And so, spiders yet are ever weavers, and ever hang from threads.

A note about story-cloths: *In the above tale, Arachne and Pallas compete to see who might weave the most beautiful story-cloth. A story-cloth was a beautiful and complex textile that was an important part of ancient Greek culture and was associated particularly with Pallas Athena herself. As Elizabeth Barber explains in her book on the history of weaving, in ancient Greece every year a group of maidens would be employed in weaving a new story-cloth for a statue of Athena in the Acropolis. Although as we see in the story of Arachne and the traditions of Athena's temple the cloths were associated primarily with women, they sometimes were applied to men as well: at one point in Apollonius Rhodius' Argonautica, Jason is described as wearing one of these cloths, suggesting high status, perhaps approaching divinity.*

The Flight of Icarus

Daedalus was a clever maker and architect. Anything that could be made with hands he would make, and the greater the challenge the greater his desire to create what he had been asked to do. But soon his skill became his downfall, and the downfall of his only son, Icarus, and this is how that came to pass.

Many years before, Daedalus had come to Crete after being accused of murder in his home city of Athens. At the time, Minos was the king of Crete, and he had won the kingship by asking Neptune to send a divine bull out of the sea to prove that he had the right to the throne. Minos promised that if Neptune did so, he would sacrifice the animal immediately to the great god of the sea. Neptune sent the bull, and Minos received the kingship, but instead of keeping his vow he sent the bull into his own herds and chose another for the sacrifice.

In revenge, Neptune placed within Pasiphae, wife of Minos, an unrelenting lust for the divine bull. Pasiphae went to Daedalus and bid

him build her a disguise so complete that the bull would think she was a cow, and thus willingly have congress with her. Daedalus agreed, and so made a wooden cow, hollowed out inside, and covered with the hide of a real cow. Pasiphae climbed inside, and when the wooden cow was brought to the pasture where the bull was, the bull came and mated with it. As part of Neptune's curse, Pasiphae soon found herself with child, and in time she gave birth. But hers was no normal infant: she was delivered of a monster, a Minotaur, with the head of a bull and the body of a human being, that turned out to have a dreadful taste for human flesh. When the Minotaur became too big and too strong for anyone to control, Minos sent for Daedalus.

"By your hand was this monster made possible, and your hand shall it be that hems it in," said the king. "Make me a place to keep it, one that is secure, such that no one who goes in shall ever come out. For it still shall need to be fed, and its victims should not be able to escape."

Daedalus therefore made the labyrinth, a maze of twisting and turning passages that would leave anyone in it unsure of their direction. He knew that the Minotaur would learn it in time, since the beast would live there, but he put on it the securest gates he could fashion. Such were the windings of the labyrinth that any victim who passed those gates was sure to become a meal for the Minotaur eventually, and even if they did not, they would never be able to find their way out again.

When the labyrinth was made and the Minotaur placed inside it, Minos proclaimed himself well satisfied. But when the hero Theseus came from Athens as part of a tribute of young people to be fed to the monster, Ariadne, the daughter of Minos asked Daedalus how the young hero might escape the labyrinth alive. The architect told her to give Theseus a ball of twine that he might wind out behind him and then follow back to the entrance. Ariadne took this advice, and so it was that Theseus was able to slay the Minotaur and escape from Crete, bearing Ariadne away with him.

Minos soon discovered how Theseus was able to escape, and thus condemned both Daedalus and his young son, Icarus, to be imprisoned in the labyrinth themselves. But the cruelty of Minos was no match for the wits of Daedalus. Daedalus took the feathers of birds and bound them together with wax and twine until he had made two pairs of wings. Strapping them onto his arms, he showed young Icarus how he might fly like the birds, for although Minos had bolted the gates of the labyrinth against them, and although the king also held the ports and harbors of Crete, yet the sky was not under his command, and it was through the air that Daedalus purposed to gain freedom for himself

and for Icarus.

“Fly carefully,” said Daedalus, “and always take the middle path. For if you fly too low over the sea, your wings may become too wet, and if you fly too high, the heat of the sun will melt the wax and the wings will break.”

And so together father and son rose into the air and flew out over the open ocean. For a time, Icarus stayed near his father, flying neither too low nor too high. But soon his spirit rejoiced overmuch in his flight, and he sought to discover how high he might go. Before his father could call him down, Icarus flew too high, and the heat of the sun melted the wax of the boy's wings, just as his father said it would. Down into the sea Icarus plummeted, the now useless feathers of his wings fluttering through the air about him, and in the depthless waters Icarus drowned. Daedalus saw the loose feathers of Icarus' wings floating on the waves, and the broken body of his son gently sinking. Daedalus mourned his dead son, but nothing could be done for him, and so he flew on alone back to Greece, keeping the middle course, on wings that he had made of nothing but feathers and twine and wax.

The Story of King Midas

The god Bacchus was accustomed to wandering about the countryside, accompanied by his wild maidens and satyrs, but especially by his foster-father, old Silenus, god of wine. One day, Bacchus went to Mount Tmolus to tend his orchards there, and when he arrived he noticed that Silenus was not with him. As was his wont, Silenus had become drunk with wine as they passed through Phrygia, and in his hazy state had been captured by some Phrygian peasants, who brought the god to their king, a man named Midas. Recognizing who Silenus was, Midas proclaimed a great festival in his honor, and his kingdom spent the next ten days making merry with the god.

On the eleventh day, Midas took Silenus back to Lydia, where he reunited him with his foster-son. Bacchus was so overjoyed at his foster-father's return that he told Midas that anything the king asked would be given to him, no matter how great or how small. Now, Midas was a greedy man, and above all he loved gold. Therefore, he said to Bacchus, “Make it so that everything I touch turns to gold! ”

Bacchus granted the gift, for thus he had promised, but privately he thought that Midas had chosen ill. Midas for his part made his way back to his home country, testing his new gift as he went. He touched a spray of leaves, and lo! instantly they became soft, yellow gold. Stones and soil, ears of wheat and apples, all became gold. He arrived

at his palace and touched the columns that fronted it. Delighted, Midas saw that they too gleamed yellow in the sun. But soon enough the fault of this choice made itself known: the king's servants set before him a good meal to welcome him home, but whatever the king touched with his lips also became gold. Meat and bread, wine and water alike all turned to precious metal. No matter how carefully he tried, nothing that Midas put in his mouth could he consume, for all turned to gold the minute it touched even the smallest part of his body.

Frantic with hunger and thirst, Midas prayed to the gods. "O have mercy upon me!" he cried. "Through my own fault have I done this, and through my own greed. Free me from this curse, and never again shall I lust after riches!"

Bacchus heard Midas' prayer. The god came to the sorrowful king and said, "If you would be rid of your curse, go to the stream that flows through Sardis. Follow its course until you come to the source of the river. There bathe in the waters, and you shall be made whole."

Midas did as Bacchus said. He bathed in the stream, and the golden touch was taken from him, but passed into the river, which even yet yields gold in its bed. From that day forth, Midas refused to return to his city, and would not live as a rich man. Rather, he wandered the woods and vales, worshipping the god Pan.

Now, Pan liked to play upon a little reed pipe he had made, and with his music he delighted the nymphs and dryads and other creatures who lived in the forests with him. He had a very high opinion of his playing, and one day he said, "I do believe my music is better even than Apollo's."

Hearing this, swift Apollo came down and challenged Pan to a contest, with Tmolus, the god of the mountain, as the judge. Pan played first, making many a tune on his pipe of reeds. Then Apollo played upon his lyre, a thing well-crafted and inlaid with ivory and gems. Tmolus listened carefully to each, but in the end had to say that the music of Apollo was superior by far. All who heard the contest agreed that Tmolus had judged rightly, all that is, except for Midas, who thought that the piping of Pan had been the better music. Apollo could not let this go unpunished, and so turned Midas' ears into the ears of an ass, long and soft and grey. And for the rest of his days, Midas hid his shameful ears under a purple turban.

Echo and Narcissus

Once there was a nymph named Liriope, who was captured by the

river-god Cephissus. He dragged her to his abode and had his way with her, and she soon found that she was with child. Wanting to know the nature of the babe she bore, Liriope went to the blind seer, Tiresias, for he was known far and wide for his wisdom and his ability to know things that were yet to come .

“Tell me of my child,” said the nymph. “Will he live to a ripe old age?”

“He will indeed,” replied Tiresias, “But only if he never comes to know himself.”

Neither Liriope nor any of her friends or advisors could understand what Tiresias meant, but as the boy grew in stature the words of the seer soon were forgotten. Narcissus reached his sixteenth year, and truly there was no other young man in the whole world to match him for beauty, neither of face nor of form. All who saw him fell in love with him, male and female, mortal and nymph alike. But Narcissus’ pride was more than the equal of his beauty, and he spurned all who sought his favor.

Now, it came to pass that one day Narcissus was in the forest hunting deer with some companions, and he was espied by a nymph named Echo. This was at a time when Echo still had visible form, although as today she could but repeat what had been spoken and could not speak at all but when spoken to, and this was a curse put upon her by the goddess Juno. For it was Echo who had been tasked with distracting Juno when Jupiter was consorting with another, and this Echo did by means of talk, for she was gifted in good speech. When Juno discovered why Echo had so sought her conversation, Juno made it so that the nymph might only say the words of others back to them, and those often incompletely.

When Echo saw Narcissus, she was seized with a burning passion for him. She followed him as he chased the deer through the forest, longing to speak to him but prevented by Juno’s curse from even calling his name. As the party of hunters went deeper into the woods, Narcissus became separated from his friends. He looked about him trying to see where they had gone, and so called out, “Is anybody here?”

Echo replied, “Here!”

Not recognizing the voice, and wondering where it came from, Narcissus called again. “Come to me!”

Echo replied, “Come to me!”

Narcissus looked about him in confusion, for the voice was not that of

any of his companions. He called out, "I shall wait; let us meet here!"

The strange voice repeated, "Let us meet here!" and as Narcissus watched, a beautiful nymph came running out of the woods and threw her arms around his neck.

But Narcissus threw her off, saying, "Do not touch me! I wish no one's embrace. I would die before I give you power over me!"

As Narcissus fled back through the trees, Echo repeated forlornly, "I give you power over me!" and then was silent.

Heartbroken, Echo wandered through the woods and along the streams, thinking of nothing but Narcissus. She went up into the mountains, where she lived in caves and among the rocks and crags. There she neglected her body, and soon she wasted away until she was nothing but bones and a voice, and then soon only the voice remained, waiting among the stones and cliffs for another's words that she might speak once more.

Narcissus, meanwhile, returned to his home, where he attracted ever more admirers. But still he spurned them all. Finally, a youth that Narcissus had turned away with especial venom made this prayer: "May he also find one that he loves, and never be able to attain them!"

The goddess Nemesis heard this prayer and vowed to fulfill it. When next Narcissus was out a-hunting, Nemesis put it in his mind to seek a pool of water where he might drink. For nearby was a clear pond with waters that lay without a ripple, and over one end of the pool grew a small grove of trees overhanging the water. Tired and thirsty from the hunt, Narcissus came to the pond and lay down in the shade of the trees, thinking to cool himself and slake his thirst. But when he leaned over the still waters, the reflection of his face gazed up at him, and Narcissus gazed back, entranced. For never had he seen so fair a face, so beautiful a form, so graceful in its manliness. Surely this was the beloved for whom he had ever waited, denying the desires of all others who had come to him?

Narcissus bent to the waters to kiss those lovely lips, only to find them vanish in a tide of ripples. He plunged his arms into the pool thinking to embrace and caress that beautiful form, to lift it from the water into the sunlight to be his own, but his hands touched nothing but the stones on the bottom of the pond. Narcissus mourned the disappearance of his beloved, and while he sat lamenting the waters of the pond stilled themselves, and once again that beauteous face appeared on the surface.

Again and again Narcissus sought to grasp the youth that gazed back up at him, and every time the youth disappeared, only to come back as the water settled. In time, Narcissus realized that what he was seeing was his own reflection, for when he bent to give the image a kiss, it stretched up to meet him in the same wise. When he stretched his arm out over the water for an embrace, the image did the same. When Narcissus spoke to the reflection, the youth in the water mouthed the same words.

“Alas!” cried Narcissus. “For I know now that I love my own self, and unhappy wretch that I am, I may not enjoy my own embraces, for I cannot tear myself in twain and the image that so entrances me is but a reflection in a mountain pond, vanishing with every effort to capture it. But if I cannot meet my own embrace, still I may gaze upon myself, and thus shall my love be requited, for the youth that I see in the waters returns my own passion.”

And so, Narcissus sat by the pool, gazing longingly at himself, and loving his reflection more than his own life. While Narcissus sat there, Echo came down from her mountain and saw him. She still was angered by his rebuff, but now that she saw how his form had become wasted by his vigil, she felt pity for him.

“Alas!” sighed Narcissus, and Echo answered him alike with her own “Alas! ”

Feeling his death come upon him, Narcissus said to his image, “Farewell!”

“Farewell!” replied Echo.

Then Narcissus laid his head upon the grass, and his spirit went to the Land of the Dead. The naiads and dryads of the place mourned his passing, and so gathered wood to make into a funeral pyre for the beautiful youth. But when they returned to the pond to fetch his body, they found it vanished, and in its place a white flower with a golden calyx, giving off a rich, sweet scent. And so ever are those flowers also called “Narcissus.”

Pyramus and Thisbe

This tale of forbidden love and the tragic death of the lovers was the inspiration for Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet,” in which the English Renaissance playwright gave some new twists to a familiar old tale. In Ovid’s original, the lovers are next-door neighbors, and no particular reason is given for their parents’ opposition to their relationship, nor are there any consequences of their deaths mentioned beyond mourning and funeral rites. Shakespeare, however, ups the dramatic ante, proposing a

blood feud between the two families. Because of the feud, the relationship of Romeo and Juliet has repercussions beyond the displeasure of their parents, and the deaths of the two lovers becomes the catalyst for reconciliation between the feuding Montagues and Capulets.

In the city of Babylon once there lived two families in adjoining houses. Pyramus was the son of one family, and Thisbe the daughter of the other. The families had no commerce with each other, and lived separate lives, but they frequently saw one another about the city, and it came to pass that the two young people fell in love with one another. They asked permission of their parents to begin courting, but the parents denied the request. Pyramus and Thisbe therefore sought out other ways to speak to each other, sometimes silently, with passing stolen glances in the streets, or with whispered words through a chink in the common wall that separated their families' homes.

One night, when each thought they might die from the pains of love, they came together at the chink in the wall and planned an escape from the city, so that they might wed in freedom. They agreed to meet at a certain mulberry tree in a nearby graveyard that very night, once their households were wrapped in sleep and they might escape undetected and unchallenged.

Thisbe managed to arrive at the tree first, and there she waited, her maidenly veil over her head and drawn over her face, as was proper. But as Thisbe waited, a lioness came padding through the graveyard, its jaws and throat dripping with the blood of a kill it had just consumed. The lioness had no designs upon the young woman: it was on its way to a brook that ran along the edge of the cemetery, looking to slake its thirst after its feast. Thisbe, however, had no way of knowing this, so when she caught sight of the great beast she fled in terror, dropping her veil in the speed of her flight .

While Thisbe cowered in a nearby cave, the lioness finished at the brook and went back the way it had come. The beast chanced upon Thisbe's veil, and set about rending it with teeth and claws. Finished with its sport, the lioness wandered away to its den outside the city.

Not long after this, Pyramus came to the graveyard seeking his beloved. He came upon the shredded remains of Thisbe's veil, which was here and there stained with the blood that had clung to the lioness' jaws. Casting about him, he also saw the firm imprints of the lioness' tracks in the soft earth, and his heart quailed within him, for surely here was evidence that his beloved Thisbe had been attacked by a wild beast and killed. Racked with guilt that Thisbe should thus die, and knowing that he could not live without her, Pyramus drew his sword, plunged it into his heart, and drawing the blade forth again fell

to the ground.

Thisbe, meanwhile, waited within the cave as long as she dared, for she neither wanted to meet the lioness nor have Pyramus think that she had been unfaithful to him. Silently creeping through the graveyard, Thisbe made her way to the trysting-tree, and there found the body of Pyramus and his sword lying nearby. She took up his body in her arms and called his name. Pyramus opened his eyes one last time and thus died looking upon his beloved Thisbe.

Distraught, Thisbe took up the sword and plunged it into her own breast, for she would not live when her own Pyramus had died. She lay down beside him in an embrace, while her blood mingled with his in the earth beneath the tree. In the morning, the families went searching for their children, and were horrified to find them dead by their own hands, lying on the cold earth of the graveyard. They performed the sacred funeral rites, and ever after mourned for young Pyramus and Thisbe. Now, until the deaths of the young lovers, the mulberry tree had borne white berries, but after that fateful night the tree and all its kin bore fruit the color of blood.

Orpheus and Eurydice

During the Renaissance, scholars, poets, and musicians alike became entranced with writings from the ancient Greek and Roman world. One new genre of music that sprang out of this interest was opera, which was originally in part an attempt to recreate or reimagine ancient Greek theater. The first of these works to survive complete was Euridice, written in 1600 by Jacopo Peri, and was premiered in Florence at the wedding of Maria de' Medici and Henry IV of France. The next such opera was Claudio Monteverdi's masterpiece, L'Orfeo, which was commissioned by Francesco Gonzaga, heir to the duchy of Mantua, and was first performed at the Mantovan ducal palace during Carnival in 1606/07. Many other composers since that time have chosen this story from Ovid's Metamorphoses as their theme, celebrating the power both of undying love and of music.

Orpheus was the son of the god Apollo and the muse Calliope. He had great gifts of music and song: his father gave him a golden lyre and taught him to play it, and his mother taught him how to compose beautiful and moving poetry to give words to his melodies. So great was the power of Orpheus' songs that he could tame animals and even make the stones themselves move and rivers change their courses.

It came to pass that Orpheus spied a young nymph named Eurydice dancing in a meadow, and he fell in love with her. They courted for a time, and eventually they agreed to be wed. It was a festive occasion:

all of their friends gathered together to celebrate the joyous day. Eurydice took some of her maidens out into the field to make chaplets of flowers for their hair, while Orpheus waited with his friends and recalled how he met his beloved and sang songs of how much he loved her.

While Orpheus and his friends were thus rejoicing, one of the maidens came running up to him, tears streaking her face. "Oh, woe! Woe to the fair Eurydice, and to her beloved Orpheus!"

Everyone gathered around her, bidding her to be calm and to tell her story, whatever it may be.

Now, this is what had happened: while Eurydice was in the meadow seeking flowers for her hair, a venomous serpent bit her on the ankle, and she fell to the ground with a cry. Her maidens gathered around her and tried to help her, but to no avail: the poison was too strong, and Eurydice died, saying only one last word, the name of her beloved Orpheus.

Silence fell. No one knew what to say. What a horrible, horrible fate, on what had been such a happy day.

Orpheus' friends tried to comfort him, but he stood as still as a stone. The news of his beloved Eurydice's death, and on their very wedding day, was too much for him. But finally, he spoke:

"I will not let this stand. I will go to Hades, to the Land of the Dead, and with my music I will compel even the God of the Underworld himself to give me back my beloved Eurydice."

Orpheus took up his lyre, and straight away went to the banks of the Styx, the black, cold river that divides the land of the living from the land of the dead. Orpheus called to Charon, the Ferryman of the Dead to come and take him across the river. Soon Charon appeared, pushing his ferryboat with a long pole. Charon looked at Orpheus and said, "You cannot cross in my ferry. Only the dead may pass this way."

Before Charon could go back into the gloom, Orpheus began to sing. He sang a song of how he loved his Eurydice, and how he wanted her back, and how unfair it was that she should die on their wedding day. Soon enough, Charon relented, moved by the passion of Orpheus' song. He allowed Orpheus onto his ferryboat and took him across the river into the Land of the Dead.

Orpheus walked cautiously and silently down the long, dark tunnel that he knew would take him to the god Hades' throne room. But soon he stopped short: a giant, three-headed dog was blocking his path, growling and gnashing its huge white teeth, long and sharp as a

warrior's dagger. This was Cerberus, the guardian of the gates of Hades, offspring of the Titans Echidna and Typhon. But Orpheus did not fear the great dog: again, he took up his lyre and he sang, this time a soothing lullaby, and soon the great beast's eyes began to close, and it swayed, and then fell to the floor, fast asleep.

Orpheus walked carefully past the three-headed dog, singing all the while. Soon he came to the hall where great Pluto, the god of the dead, sat enthroned with his wife, Proserpina.

"Why have you come here?" said Pluto to Orpheus.

"I have come to claim my bride, Eurydice, who was taken from me unjustly on our wedding day," said Orpheus.

"The dead are the dead, and they belong to me and my realm," said Pluto. "I will not release her."

Orpheus did not make a reply, but rather began strumming his lyre. He then sang a song about how much he loved Eurydice, how greatly they had both looked forward to life together, and how unfair it was that she should die on a day that should have been nothing but joy for her.

The god of the dead was unmoved by this, but his queen heard Orpheus' plea. Proserpina turned to her divine husband and said, "My lord, surely even your heart cannot fail to sorrow along with Orpheus. The dead are the dead, yes, and they are in your power, but does that not also mean that you might release them from your realm if you so choose? Think what it might have meant to you, if I were snatched away from you for all eternity. I entreat you, hear this man's plea, and grant his request."

Pluto could not refuse what Proserpina asked of him, so he turned to Orpheus and said, "Very well. I will release Eurydice to you, on one condition: that you not turn to look at her until both of you have left my realm and are once again in the land of the living."

Orpheus gladly assented to this condition and began his return to the upper world. It was a long, cold, dark journey, and he could hear nothing and no one behind him. What if Pluto were tricking him? What if Eurydice were not being returned? The temptation to turn around and look was unbearable. Orpheus withstood it all through the halls of the dead. He withstood it all through the long tunnel that led up to the land of the living, the light of which he could see shining before him. He withstood it until he found himself standing on the grass, in the sunshine, and then he could bear it no more: he turned and looked to see whether Eurydice was behind him, and lo! she was

there! Pluto had kept faith with him. Eurydice's shade had followed all the way through the Land of the Dead.

But Orpheus had turned too soon, for Eurydice herself had not yet come into the sunshine with her beloved Orpheus. Orpheus turned and saw her, and his heart leapt, but as he did so, Eurydice's shade was pulled back into the gloom, never to see the land of the living again.

Orpheus' sorrow was so great, that he could not bring himself to sing even a lament for his lost bride. He wandered about, grieving, speaking no word, plucking not a string from his lyre. And so, he went, until one day a group of Bacchantes, wild women who served the god of wine, found him sitting beside a river .

"Play us a song!" said one.

"Yes, a song of merriment, that we might dance!" said another.

But Orpheus made them no answer. This enraged the Bacchantes so, that they seized the grieving man and tore him limb from limb. His head and his lyre they threw into the river, his lips still speaking one last word: "Eurydice." The lyre was taken up by the gods, and placed in the heavens as the constellation Lyra, while his shade descended into the Land of the Dead, where he was finally reunited with his beloved bride, and there they live together in Elysium still.

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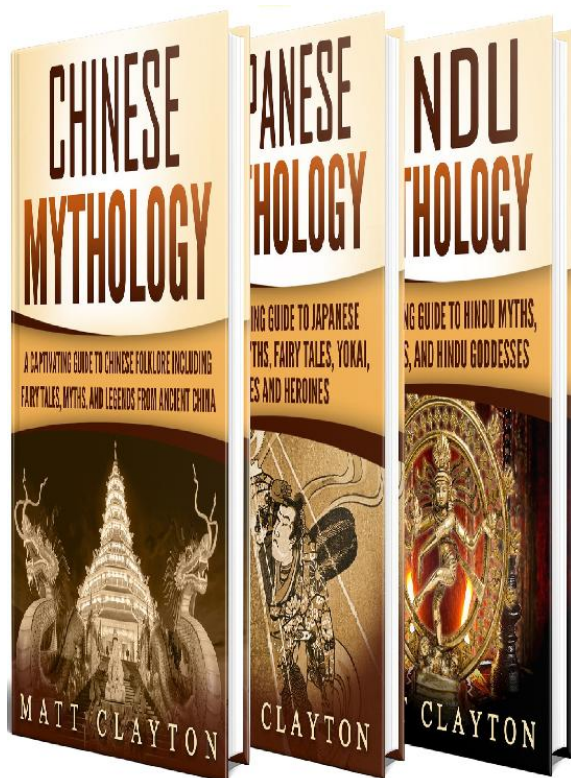
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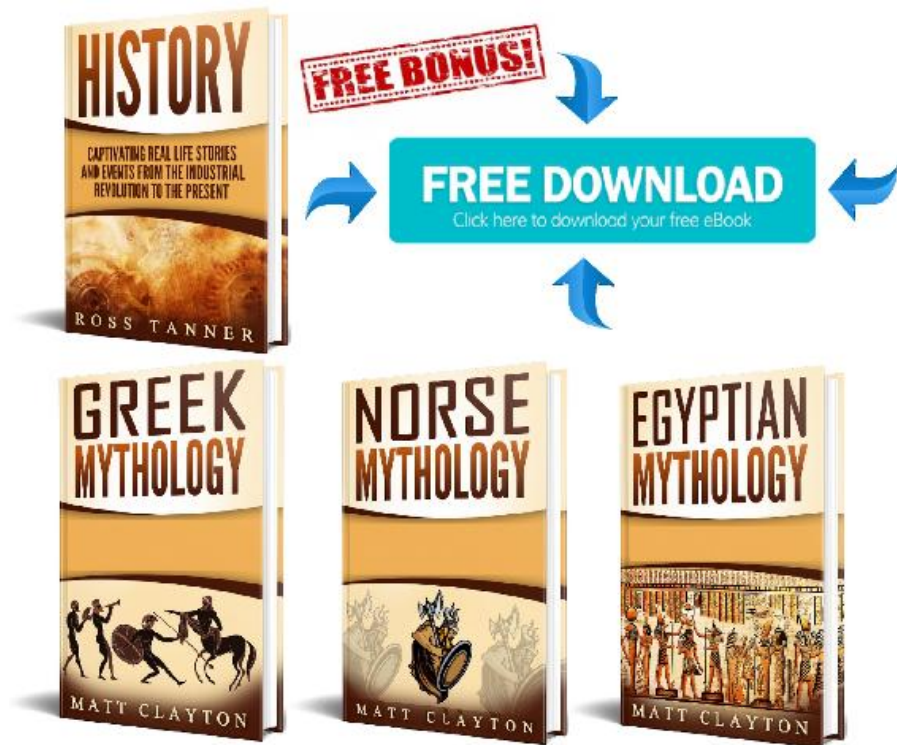
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